CHINA MAKE IT GOOD

BRIAN E. DRAKE

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Oxford, NY 13830 USA
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CHINA MAKE IT GOOD

A Novel

Brian E. Drake

BOOK 1

SONG WEI

At last we have received notice from the corporation that our son, Tsui, is officially declared dead. Of course we knew that Tsui is dead. It has been fourteen months since the disaster, and we had long ago given up any illusion of his surviving in the first few days. This piece of paper, however, makes it as if he has died again.

Perhaps I had not truly accepted that my eldest son was dead. Certainly I never grieved for him as I would if I had seen him laid to rest here in his own country. How could I grieve for him? My grief was too great, and yet too small. How could I grieve for a single person, even my own son, when his was only a single death among more than a million dead? When the Tokyo and Yokohama towers came down that terrible dusk, when the flames sprang up to light the darkening sky, and the firestorm rushed through the air like a dragon, the voices of billions rose to the heavens in

horror and in grief. Mine among them. Could my little voice, my little grief, be heard in such a great noise?

Here in Beijing, two thousand kilometers distant from him, I knew immediately from the first reports on the television that my son was dead. Or thought I knew. For he was in one of the towers of Yokohama, he and all his colleagues. I had sent him there. Not directly, but he had been building a career that I had arranged for him. The tower crumpled, fell, and burned, along with all the others. I hoped that he was dead, dead in the first great roar of a rocking world. To think that he might be alive even a few moments in that desolation . . .

I had many evil dreams in those days of my son trapped in some small, dark place, injured, conscious, knowing that he was doomed beneath the tons of rubble, unable to pull himself free. I thought of such things all the time, until my mind refused to think at all. I never told his mother of these thoughts. She did not tell me her own. For if we learned that our own thoughts were worse than the other's, how could we look at one another ever again?

Now this piece of paper, with its simplified characters that I have always judged ugly, has arrived to cover a wound I did not realize I had kept safe and fresh. And I must stop to catch my breath, to try to decide how I may take one step after another, to try to remember how to breathe. This is why we humans have such a strong inclination toward the habitual: so that we can continue in the face of despair and horror. It is a talent, this ability to eat, to breathe, to go to our jobs, to not think, to merely act, whatever dreadful thing has happened. Like every talent it has two keen

edges; we fall too easily into lazy habit, and blunder through our lives only eating, breathing, going to our jobs, instead of thinking, understanding. But in the face of the terrifying it is very useful. In the days that followed the news of the destruction of Tokyo and Yokohama, when our nation finally tore itself away from the television news reports and tried to return to its usual business, I went dutifully to my office, spoke dutifully to my staff, ate dutifully of the meals my wife dutifully prepared. So the agony of knowing that our son was dead, and the agony of not knowing that he was certainly dead, dulled to a bearable hurt under the calm progress of the habitual.

Unthinking habit—a saving thing or a stupid, mindless thing. Every good turns bad, when its moment passes. If only every flaw were simply and only a flaw! Every virtue simply and only a virtue! If only life were the uncomplicated set of rules so many seem to think it. If only I had not happily arranged my eldest son's job with my own company, Jiang Long Group Corporation, when he left the university. If only he had not happily accepted it. If only the earth had not opened. If only he were alive here in my home, arguing again with his mother about his clothing.

They argued much about his clothing. He favored, like all the young men, the latest Western styles. She, a good Maoist, could never reconcile herself to his fine suits, though I know she was proud of how handsome he looked in them. I caught her once examining his shirts carefully, feeling their fabrics, running her fingers along the crisp collars and cuffs. My son dressed far better than I ever dared to, even in my high position with the corporation. It would not be seemly

for a man of my generation, however rich, to wear such clothing. Plain wool and cotton were my stuff. It was for the young to change our ways in these matters. My wife started when she noticed my watching her, and placed the shirts back into their drawer with a disgusted "Tch! Tch!" I smiled, and she said to me, "For this we spilled our blood in the streets!"

I laughed. "That was our grandfathers and grandmothers."

"Their blood is ours!" My wife is fierce in debate, and more fierce when caught in a false statement. This is why she has been unsuccessful in her own business life, and not because she is a woman, though that is where she lays the blame.

"This is how he must be if he will have a good career now. Things are different than when we were young."

She shrugged unhappily. "I don't make fairy tales of the old days," she said sadly, "but I don't think we should so easily forget them at the bottom of a drawer full of silk and Oxford linen."

But the world is indeed much different from our grandparents' time, even from the time of our own youth. Our government buys the securities, and thus the debt, of other countries in order to make wealth for ourselves such as the Chairman never dreamed. To increase that wealth, Chinese businesses move beyond our jealous shores into the wide world, and to make this happen we must inspire the respect of those we would make money from. It is not how our great men of the past would have liked us to take the world, but it is, after all, the only way possible. Armies are too

expensive, and ideologies follow profit, not the other way around. If we must adopt the manners that show we understand and respect capital, so we will. Thus our poor people may become wealthier as we all become wealthier, and let other nations worry about their own.

The old times have much to recommend them. I think what would have been most pleasant about the old times was their quiet, steady pace. Without automobiles, trains, planes, telephones, fax machines, television, there would have been time, there would have been room to experience our own lives. If something horrible happened then, one learned of it gradually, as the news drifted through the land. When bad news came, one saw its coming and was able to meet it with dignity. When someone died, there was time to grieve, and time to feel the grief grow smaller. Nowadays the television screen flashes, an announcer says a line or two, and suddenly pictures of unimaginable catastrophe assault one's eyes. One cannot comprehend, yet one cannot look away. We sit for hours, days, watching the same unbearable pictures, and there is never time enough to understand, never time enough to look away.

I found the official notice of our son's death opened on our hallway table when I came into our apartment after work today. My wife, Jo Yin, had come home before me and of course had seen it first. She was in the kitchen, silently preparing the evening meal with our ayi, Yukari. Like many in China, we took in as servant one of the Japanese refugees who poured into our land after the earthquake. Yukari and her small daughter, Michiko, quickly made themselves part of

our family, and our younger son, Hyu—conceived almost immediately after the ban on more than one child in a family was lifted, after China began to move into other countries, and after the spate of cesarean-section deaths—looks upon Yukari as his aunt, and little Michiko as his cousin. Yukari is a very good cook, and if my wife was with her in the kitchen, it was because she did not want to be alone.

I held the notice in my hand for a very long while. I could hear the sound of knives chopping vegetables in the kitchen, the sizzle of hot oil. Otherwise there was no sound. My son was not yet home from school. I read the ugly simplified characters through more than once, but I was really only running my eyes across the page while my mind fled to easier thoughts. I found myself wishing I had kept up my study of the guqin.* How comforting it would be now to seat myself before the long, graceful instrument, my reflection dim and rippled in its lacquered surface. I would take a moment to study its inlaid designs of mother of pearl, then I would place my hands and pluck the silk and nylon strings. My favorite guqin melody is "The Song of Cu-land," I played it often as a student and my fingers still know the pattern of its playing. I would draw forth tones to make the air tingle. When I was young, playing the guqin always made me think, foolishly, of gentlemen in embroidered silk robes sitting alone in their dark studies, making music for themselves alone. A very pretty picture.

Well, such a gentlemanly pastime has vanished in the busyness of business, a career, a wife, a child, and

* Large Chinese zither with seven strings, historically the instrument of the intelligentsia.

then another child. There was scarcely time to wake, eat, do my job, govern my family, sleep. Certainly no time for sitting alone in a darkened study making private music. The guqin was the past, and the present is a piece of paper in my hand with a polite affirmation of my eldest son's nonexistence.

I placed the notice again on the hallway table. I went to our bedroom, removed my suit jacket and necktie, decided they did not need to be pressed, and hung them neatly in my closet. I took off my shoes and stockings and sat on the bed to pull on a favorite pair of soft slippers. Then I tried to stand up and gradually understood with some amusement that I could not. My legs would not flex, my knees would not unbend. I noticed that my heart was not beating. I concentrated briefly, and my heart refused to beat. My amusement became calm observation. It was another few seconds before I felt a nudge of fear that something was actually wrong. I realized that I had not inhaled for some time. My fear swelled to something like panic. A roaring noise filled my ears like the toppling of buildings, like the din of millions of voices shrieking in terror. I decided I was dying. I felt sad because I would be giving my wife and child yet another pointless trouble to live with.

Yukari found me. She had come to me to tell me that my wife was crying and that I must come to comfort her, but she found me lying twisted upon the bed, my face blue. Yukari is very capable and understood immediately what needed to be done. She shouted for Jo Yin and then called for an ambulance. I am a rather important man, and the ambulance came quickly. The little drama ended with a brief visit to the

hospital and a prescription for pills to control my newly discovered congestive heart failure. When we came home again, weary as only a night in a hospital can make one, the notice was gone from the hallway table. Yukari, of course. I wondered for a moment where she had put it. It was, after all, an official notice, and important, somehow. Then I forgot it in the bother of being led to my bed, being undressed, being fed a little soup and given the first of the pills that prove me an old man.

* * *

Happily my health permitted me to return to my office in time for our department's presentation to the governing board, for they have decided to follow our counsel. Jiang Long Group Corporation will open branch offices in the United States.

The figures we presented are very impressive. The dollar has fallen so low since the Tokyo disaster and the resulting collapse of the stock market, not to mention the damage done to the United States's own West Coast by the resulting tsunamis, that the price of labor there is most favorable. Further, our own government is eager to have our companies open offices in the United States, in order to provide employment for the Americans; we must evidently strengthen their economy so that our own will not suffer, as we own so much of their national debt.

Therefore we have begun plans to open two offices within the next three years, in Seattle and New York City. If these prosper we will expand further, with

factories in their states of Michigan and Georgia, where wages should be especially low.

I have been asked by our chief officer to take command of the planning for the Seattle office myself. This is a high honor for me. Yet I am rather afraid I may not be strong enough now for this great effort. Of course Jo Yin is adamant that I accept. "This is a thing of pride for us," she said to me, "and more importantly, it will keep you too busy to think about our troubles." This is very true. But since my illness I have caught myself at times in little moments of nervousness. I do not believe I fear death. I have no fear of being dead—how can one fear nothingness? But I fear giving my wife and my young son yet another grief. I dread causing them more pain, although it would be of course unavoidable. I shall certainly die one day. But not now. I hope not now. Not so soon.

And I have thought so much of my son's death—the suddenness of it, the pain he may have felt, if he was not killed instantly, the overwhelming horror he must have known, if only for the briefest moment—that perhaps I have filled my own thoughts of death with his dread.

No. For myself, nothingness would be a good thing—if one were able to experience it at all! But I must be careful for my family's sake.

"Of course you must accept," Jo Yin said again.

"It will mean that I must go myself to Seattle to oversee the opening of our facility."

She was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "Yes, of course. And how long would you be gone?"

"It might be as much as two years."

"Ah."

"I would not be able to come home more than once or twice in that time," I went on. "There are so few flights available these days."

"Ah."

She was quiet for a long while then. I think she was thinking how to say that this would be a good thing, without making it a hurtful thing to say.

"Well," she said at last, "it still must be done. We cannot afford that you should refuse."

I nodded. "I suppose so. Still, I am worried. So soon after I have been sick . . ."

She shook her head, "Tch! Tch! You are strong as a bull yet, old man! If they should offer me such an important job to do, I would have my bags packed and be running to the airport!"

I am sure she believes it would be much better if she were the one to go. There are times I surprise her looking at our son, at me, as if she could not bear to have us near her. Not with hatred. But having us near reminds her too strongly of what she has lost. And of course she thinks she could do a much better job than I! She has said more than once that if the world were arranged differently, she would be the executive vice president of a great corporation and I would be the one managing dressmakers!

"In any case," I said, "I will not be going anywhere for more than a year. We must first send agents to make the proper government contacts, and to find suitable properties for us to buy. Reports are that they will grant us very favorable terms, because we will bring at least fifty thousand jobs to their cities."

Jo Yin rolled her eyes. "Buying property in the United States, and hiring their people! I never thought

I should see such doings! Of course the workers there are terribly lazy and terribly spoiled. We won't get a proper day's work from any of them."

"I don't think that's true. And if they have been spoiled, another three years of their current economy will cure them of it. I think they will be begging us for such jobs."

"I can't imagine what Chairman Mao would have said to such a state of things."

"The Chairman was, above all, a practical man, and I am sure he would approve."

"Not approve. But accept." Jo Yin is very precise.

"And I think he might have caught the humor of it, too," I said.

"I never thought we should see such doings!"

So I accepted the task, and we decided to celebrate. We dressed our son Hyu in his nicest suit and went to eat and see the opera at the Nanjing Shi Jingju Tuan.* The opera was *Zhao shi guer**, Li Baoqin played the General Tu-an Ku, and made such a great roaring and stamping when he described his plot against the emperor's son-in-law, Zhao, that even Hyu applauded, though I don't think he understood all the words. Zhu Ya played the orphan. I do not usually enjoy women taking men's roles, but Zhu's singing is exquisite and she played a most moving young man. The scene of the orphan's reading of the scroll, his discovery of the conspiracy Tu-an Ku made against his father, how Tu-an Ku trained the great Tibetan dog so that it should attack only Zhao when ordered to ferret out a traitor, and the horrible death of the blameless Zhao, all of it

* Nanjing City Beijing Opera Troupe.
** Orphan of the Zhao Family

capped with the orphan's proud song, “If I do not kill this villain I am not a man, I am not afraid to face him and demand revenge!” were thrilling. Hyu, in fact, became quite excited, and applauded very much. It makes me happy to see my son enjoying our own Chinese art, as he listens so much to American music.

It was my own father who taught me to love our theatre. He played the er-hu* well and often played the opera melodies at home. Then he had also many recordings of the great actors of the past, such as Mei Lanfang and Zhou Xinfang and Li Shaochun, so that I learned how beautiful it all could be. He very carefully explained the stories to me before taking me to a performance, and always whispered the lines of poetry which I could not understand, for many lines in the plays are written in the old, high style of Mandarin, and the words have changed or disappeared over the centuries. I suppose this must be what it is like for Americans to hear Shakespeare's plays, and only half understanding what the actors say. But my father taught me well, so that now I may teach my own sons. Son.

Tsui enjoyed the opera very much, though I suppose he preferred the American and Japanee pop music, as all the young people do now. Still, he always accompanied us and I sometimes heard him whistling one or another of the classical tunes.

The performance moved me very much, this strong old story of a son avenging his father's murder and gaining pride and peace. If only life were so simple! Some deaths cannot be avenged. How does one strike back against the earth? How does one find peace when

* Chinese two-string fiddle.

the ground which opened up and swallowed his son must ever and always remain beneath his feet? There can never be true peace when such a thing happens. And there can never be perfect trust again. Trust? When the very earth may open and swallow you?

I drank too much Mao Tai* tonight at the opera. I must attend to my work and not think such thoughts.

* * *

"You see now that I was right," Jo Yin said to me again, with grim satisfaction. "You have been working so very hard that you do not have time to worry about anything. But still, you must be careful, Wei. I'm not happy that you are not sleeping enough."

The last few weeks I have been sleeping much less than usual, and I feel the effects. But my work is so exciting that I do not wish to brood upon either my sorrows or my health. We are moving rapidly on our expansion plans. The economic situation in the United States worsens daily, we must move quickly to profit from it. Already we have contracted for two properties in Seattle, and an office building in New York City, at prices far lower than we could have dreamed even three months ago. Unemployment in the United States has grown to such heights that their government is eager, desperate for any business they think will create even a handful of jobs. We have negotiated incredibly generous tax abatements with their federal and local authorities. In fact, in Seattle we will pay only one percent of our net domestic profits in taxes for twenty years, and in New York nothing for twenty-five years.

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* Chinese white liquor.

Nothing! They give us practically free the land where we will build our plant, and all that we give in return is the promise to employ at least ten American citizens for every Chinese executive we bring. We will hire most of the Americans as manufacturing and maintenance employees. Their native architects and construction companies submitted ridiculously low bids for their services, but our agents warn that corruption is rampant and we will have to guard carefully against poor-quality materials and bad workmanship, so we have located Chinese-Americans to do these things instead. We should be able to trust them more easily. Yet we must still offer them the appropriate bribes. There is something in the American air that taints everything with a pointless cunning. Well, we have had experience with this unfortunate underhandedness already, in Japan, and Vietnam, and the Philippines.

"Also we have seen so little of you, and you will be leaving soon and we won't see you at all for more than a year," Jo Yin said. "I think you should make some time before you go to spend with the boy."

"Yes, that's a good idea, Jo Yin. I will see what I can do."

Hyu has become intrigued by the work I am doing, and when time permits I show him our reports and explain how the numbers work. I am glad he is interested, for since his brother's death he has often been quiet and withdrawn, and I do not like to see him so. And he is twelve years old now and it is time he begin to learn how business operates.

"What is this chart?" he asked me the other night as I arranged my papers for yet another presentation to the governing board.

"That compares the fees of various security companies in Seattle."

"What is 'security companies'?"

I have been studying English for my coming stay in Seattle, and Hyu has been learning how to read the Roman alphabet—it will be an important skill when he is ready to begin his career. He sounded out the words "security companies" very slowly and pronounced the last word "companize."

"Compa*nees*."

"Compa*nees*."

"That is the plural of 'company.'"

"I see the s there, but why is it spelled this way?"

"It's English."

He nodded, resigned. "But what are these compa*nees*?"

"They supply guards to protect us and our property."

Hyu was puzzled by this, for of course there is little trouble about such things here, and in any case the government takes care of all such matters. "But protect you from what?"

I was careful not to worry him with the dangers that grow in the United States, where even people who were born there and have lived their whole lives there have been beaten, or murdered, because they look foreign. It seems that whenever bad things happen, the Americans turn on anyone who looks different than they do, or how they think they look. In this way China and the United States are not so very different.

But in China, of course, we have a history of foreigners invading. Mongols, Japanese. The Americans do not have this history, so it is odd that they should be so afraid of outsiders. They seem to have a very odd idea of what a "real" American is—white and middle-aged, mostly, even though that group is scarcely 10% of their populace, according to the statistics I have studied. When hard times come, they turn on anyone who doesn't fit this picture, and most odd of all, the non-white will do so as well, attacking those from the Muslim countries, or from India or the South Seas, and so on. So we will need security forces to guard us and our property there.

"Well," I explained to Hyu, "from thieves who would like to steal our equipment, mostly. And from anybody who would try to hurt our people. We are deciding which company will do the best work, for the best price."

Hyu shook his head. "If you're afraid of the Americans stealing from us, why do you hire Americans to guard you? You should have Chinee doing it."

I winced at his slang, but ignored it. "Ah, I had thought of that, too." I smiled. "But we must hire Americans. If we hire them to work for us, they will respect us more and want us to stay and be successful."

"It doesn't seem the best way of doing things."

"That is a very good observation, Hyu. But in business the best way is not always the correct way."

Hyu shook his head again and left me to my work.

Besides security companies, I am also evaluating food suppliers for our offices and cafeterias, materials suppliers for the factory, housing for management,

automobile and truck leases, and on and on and on: the endless details that are so important and yet, at bottom, not important at all. What is more important? To foresee the risks we will run by moving into another country, especially the United States. For if their situation becomes too desperate, I fear to think what they may do. Yet they are a widely scattered population, with almost no history of common action or popular organization. Their only widespread political activity is voting every two or four years, and most of them do not even do that. Most of them seem to believe that great events are made by a few great men, that the average person has no strength or power, no ability to be heard or to make things happen. And most of them, as far as I can tell in my viewing of their television and my reading of their newspapers, seem to believe that's as it should be. We Chinese know that average people, when they join together, can accomplish greater deeds than any single great man. This can be frightening. If the American populace begins to experience real hunger, or illness . . .

Well, I hope that events do not come to such a trouble. Our very presence there, and the presence of other Chinese companies, many of which are planning as we are, will forestall the worst of these possibilities. We will bring money to the United States, employ its people, give them homes and food and medicine. It is a good thing for us all.

Some of our management believe we should already be making plans to expand into other North American cities, such as Toronto, Montreal, Miami, Atlanta, Houston. But I have counseled caution. We do not

want to expose ourselves to the same predicament that so many American corporations are now suffering. They moved their facilities to the cheap labor markets of Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Venezuela. But those countries were hit hardest by the Japanese economic withdrawal. Famine, disease, rioting, and martial law have devastated those countries, and the American facilities that sought to profit from them are now boarded up, or burned down. Each day I read that another American company has declared bankruptcy, which means more workers unemployed. A poison of failure has hit their capitalist system, each foreclosure driving down their stock market and ruining yet other businesses.

What we must do, we Chinese, is learn to understand their profit-driven, rabid capitalism and discover how to transform it into something that benefits not just the rich, but everyone in society. This is the role I see for our people. We still have the ideals of the revolution; we must bring our philosophies, our science, to the West and marry them to this mangled system of capitalism so that everyone may live comfortably and prosperously, according to his needs. Then we will all be safe.

I have drafted a plan for our company in which our young managers, at the beginning of their careers, will spend some time, perhaps a year or two, in our new offices abroad. A sort of international apprenticeship. I believe this will give our future leaders an important new perspective. For we must learn that not China, but the world, is our marketplace. We have lived sequestered within our borders for too much of our long history. When there has been trouble, or fear, we

have withdrawn and closed our borders to the outside world. It is a natural reaction for us Chinese—as I learned after the Tokyo-Yokohama earthquake, when it took all my strength and all my will to say no to my desire to close all doors and focus my eyes inward to my pain. But I have fought the conservative, old-fashioned element in our management—in myself!—and have demanded that we move outward into the world, despite our losses. China is now, alone among the great nations of the world, in a position of great strength. We alone have suffered no physical damage to our borders. We alone have been almost untouched by the economic turmoil which Japan's destruction has wrought. We alone have a strong, determined populace, well fed, well educated, healthy, able and eager to move forward, rather than hide and nurse its wounds. Now is the time for China to do what she should have done centuries ago: take our place as leader of the wide world.

* * *

The day has at last come when I will be leaving for Seattle in the United States. Yukari has packed my bags, Jo Yin has seen that a large supply of the medicine for my heart has been tucked safely into the small bag I will carry on the plane with me. All is ready. Jiang Long Group Corporation has chartered two jets to carry us to Seattle and New York. There will be no one but Chinese on my plane—our two American consultants are on the other—but we have strict orders to speak only English. I am sorry to say that my English has not progressed as well as I had

hoped. There has been, after all our long preparations, so little time! Only two years, and too much work to do in them to allow a man of my age to master a new language. I can carry on a somewhat complicated conversation, but I fear I shall not be discussing philosophy with the Americans any time soon.

I have stayed away from the office these last two days to spend a good deal of time with my son. Hyu has asked me to send him CDs of American pop music. I would prefer that he not listen to much of this music, but of course I promised I would. After all, we are doing business there; he will someday be doing business there, too. The United States is now part of us. And we will be part of them.

But my traditionalism seized hold of me, and yesterday I took my boy and Yukari's daughter, Michiko, to a hand-puppet show by the China Art Puppet Troupe. We enjoyed ourselves very much. The first play was *The Painted Skin*, much shorter than I remember it. The story was the same: the old retainer served the scholar Wang his tea in a very dignified and realistic manner, and Wang quoted Li Po's poem of the Intruder: "Why do you enter through the silken curtains of my bower?" Then with a wild din of cymbals the demon appeared in a cloud of silk streamers waggled on the end of a stick. Its tiny blue-painted face leered, its eyes bulged out, and its sharp tusks glittered in the light. Michiko clapped her hands, as excited as if she had found a new videogame. She was even more delighted when the demon announced its determination to kill the young scholar, spun about, and in a puff of blue smoke changed into a beautiful maiden. Hyu pretended to like it, but he is at that

awkward age where puppets seem childish. I think his is the first generation of children to find puppets childish, and I think he was embarrassed to see me enjoying it as much as Michiko. This I blame on the television. Television makes everything else seem unreal, and unimportant, though, of course, its reality is as much a stylized illusion as that of the puppet show, or the opera.

The demon, now transformed into a beautiful maiden, flirted shamelessly with the willing Wang, and the old retainer kept popping in to interrupt as he became more and more suspicious of the supposed lady. We laughed at this very much. Finally the demon got Wang drunk, and when he collapsed into his bed, calling out, "Come to me, beautiful lady, beautiful lady, come!" the demon cast off its painted lady skin, became the demon once more, and leaped at the scholar. But of course the loyal old retainer appeared and beat the demon with a broom until it vanished in another rustle of silk streamers, leaving its painted skin behind. I don't suppose the children noticed just how odd it was that Wang, after thanking the old retainer profusely, carefully tucked the painted skin into a box and carried it away with him!

Next there was a display of martial arts. First two warrior puppets swung their swords at one another and wrestled athletically, even trading costumes at one point. Then two more warriors appeared with long staves. They banged and clattered at one another, turned somersaults in the air, spun and twirled, the puppeteers tossing the little cloth beings into the air and catching them again on their hands so that the warriors missed no step in their furious assault. Finally

four more puppets joined the fray and the stage was filled with flying bodies and glittering swords and spinning staves. A real virtuoso display, and Hyu gave up his sophisticated disapproval and applauded and whistled. We left the square and treated ourselves to flavored ices before the train ride home.

The car will arrive at 1800 to pick me up. I asked Hyu to sit with me and help me with my English. He held the little flashcards.

"Jîxiang," Hyu read.

"Sign."

"Pèihé."

"Cooperate."

"I don't know this character."

"What is the English?"

"Sup-port."

"Yôngdài."

"This language is very hard," Hyu said after a few more cards. "Don't they speak anything easier over there?"

"Some of the Americans may, but most of them only speak English."

"How barbaric!" he said with youthful indignation. "We all speak Mandarin and Cantonese, and mâma speaks Vietnamese and Cambodian, too."

"That's because she lived in Jinzhou and dealt with the refugees when she was younger."

"Why?"

"Because when she was a young woman she worked for a year with the International Red Cross. That was before we were married."

"I never knew that!"

“I don't think it was a happy time for her, and you know your mother doesn't speak of things she does not like.”

“Except the music I listen to.”

I smiled. “We do not mind your listening to such music. But we want you to also like our own music.”

“I do like Chinee music! I like David Tao and Jack Chou.”

“That is not real Chinese music.”

“You mean *old* Chinee music.”

“Their names aren't even Chinese,” I said.

Hyu said nothing. He thinks I am old-fashioned, but he wouldn't dare say it. I think his is, too, the first generation to think of their elders as old-fashioned. Before, the ways of the elders were the proper way, and all new ways were suspect. Now everything is reversed, and the new is accepted without thinking, simply because it is new. This is how people think in other lands—I know that I have to understand it, but I do not think I need to approve.

“But you'll have to listen to American music over there,” he said. “I could tell you who’s good so you won’t waste your time listening to bad music.”

“I will be far too busy to listen to music, except when I am entertaining the American businessmen.” I dread taking clients out to their nightclubs. I have visited the American-managed bars here and the noise and bad music give me a terrible headache. Not to mention the food. I wonder if I will be able to plead my bad heart as an excuse to avoid such engagements if they become too annoying?

“Give me another word.”

“Cítuì.”

“Discharge.”

“What does that mean?”

“To make someone unemployed.”

“You'll use that word a lot.” He grinned. Even Hyu has heard of the American reputation for laziness.

“I hope not.” But we laughed.

Yukari called us to dinner a few moments later. She and Jo Yin had made a feast for my farewell. Two soups and seven courses, with yu* at the end of the meal as though it were New Year's Day. Yukari made two Japanese dishes as well, a miso soup with seaweed –very expensive!—and natto, from fermented soybeans, very smelly and very sticky, which we ate to be polite, though Hyu made a terrible face when he tasted it.

At last the dinner was done and Yukari took the children away to do their homework so that Jo Yin and I might be alone a little while together.

Jo Yin made me promise, with her firm voice, to take my medicine and to see a doctor every three months. “I don't trust those American doctors,” she said. “They wouldn’t know congestive heart failure from a head cold. Use only the doctor Jiang Long is providing, unless you have no choice. If you have the slightest pain or trouble breathing, you go to the doctor right away. And stay away from their hospitals!”

“It’s only for eighteen months,” I said to her. It amuses me that she worries so.

“Everything will take longer than you imagine, and you will be there at least two full years. Besides, even

* A whole fish dish served at the end of a traditional New Year's dinner.

eighteen months in a savage land can be a lifetime. Don't make it the end of yours! And you will call me every week?"

We have set up a time for regular telephone calls, early morning on what will be for her tian,* but for me will be Sunday afternoon.

"And more often if anything is wrong with you."

"I will be fine. I am feeling very strong."

"You are looking very tired," she said, after studying me closely. "But that is your work. Please, give as much of your work as you can to the people under you. That is why they are there. And don't let the Americans cheat you! They are all sneaky and not to be trusted."

"I know, I know. But let's not talk about anything just now."

So Jo Yin and I said goodbye as husband and wife. Afterwards she started to say something. I think she wanted to warn me against being with any American woman. She thinks everyone over there has some terrible disease or other. But of course she said nothing. And I hope she knows that even if I did desire a woman while away for so long, I would be very careful and not choose an American.

The car was on time. Jo Yin did not cry until I had closed the car door. I waved to my little family and we pulled into the terrible Beijing traffic. I must say, that is something I will not miss for these two years. It will be good to be in a city of a civilized size, such as Seattle. I imagine it will be in many ways like Shanghai, sitting as it does on the water. But I hope quieter.

* Sunday, or "day seven."

My colleagues and I settled into our seats on the jets and the planes took off on time, for a wonder. I swallowed my pill with a cup of tea. We will fly to Honolulu in Hawaii, then refuel and fly on to Seattle. I will have much time, too much time, to read the last of my Chinese reports, to practice my English with the Chinese-American stewards, and to sleep.

The plane moves down the runway. We sit for a short time, then move again, our speed builds, and we rise. We are airborne, rushing from the setting sun into the dusk. In twelve hours we will see the new land that we go to make our own. So Jiang Long Group Corporation, and China, come to the United States.

BOOK 2

SARA

Karen from downstairs come up today and tell me another one of the neighbors be movin out. “John Williams he got a brother in Oregon got hisself a job,” she say to me, “with one of them Chinee companies that come in. He tell Dan if he get hisself out there he could get him a job easy, so they goin.”

“But how they goin to get out there?” I say to her. “I don’t think they got a dime more than we do, and we don’t got the money to be movin all the way cross the country. It cost money to move so far.”

Karen she shake her head. “They goin to try to sell most of they stuff, I guess, but I don't know who can buy it, it’s not like anybody round here got two nickels to rub together. Most of it’s junk anyway, and who buy

that? I guess his brother is sendin him some money so he can go out there first, then he'll send back somethin when he get the job and Roxanna and the kids can go out too." She shake her head. "But can you imagine, Sara? Havin to go all the way out to Oregon with two little kids on the bus? Cause they got to take the bus. I can't imagine it. I took the bus once to visit my aunt and uncle in South Dakota, they the only family I got left, and that was a terrible trip! Hot and dusty, and from New York to there just one long stretch of nothin. I wouldn't want to be doin that trip with two little kids."

I got up to get us some more coffee, which we still got plenty of, though it cost so awful much it hurts to buy it. But you got to have somethin to make youself feel good, and coffee be good and homey.

"Well," I say to Karen, "everybody got to do what they got to do. If there be work out there, then John got to go get it. You'd think with all the Chinee companies round the city here that there'd be more work, but they don't hire hardly anybody."

"They don't put factories in the middle of New York City," Karen say back to me. "They just put they offices here, with all the bosses in them." She shake her head and put some sugar in her coffee. "Chinee companies everywhere, you can't be walkin down the street without seein a Chinee man in a suit. I never thought I'd see it. They just takin over. I see on the news they even be openin plants down in Georgia and Texas, can you imagine it?"

"What kind of plants?" I say back to her. "What they makin?"

She shrug at me. “I don’t know, they makin some sort of electronic stuff, I guess. At least they bringin some work into the country.”

“Not for plain people . . .”

“They hired enough secretaries and such when they come here, Keisha’s two boys be workin in the mailroom of one of those Chinee companies.”

“If there’d just be some sort of work for plain people . . .” I don't say any more. I shouldn't get started in on that. I feel the tears startin up again, but I take a quick sip of coffee and go fiddle with somethin on the cabinet so Karen don't see.

Course she see anyway, but she such a good friend she don't say anythin. Almost three months now since my Don left and not a word from him, not even a letter tellin us where he be. When he first left I was so mad I don’t care if I ever hear from him again. But after a little while I just about couldn't stand not knowin where he is. If it wasn’t for havin to take care of little Tommy I probably would have gone completely crazy and be livin out on the street like so many others do. But I got a little boy to watch out for and I can’t be takin the time to go crazy.

“Well,” Karen say, “things be the way things be, and there’s nothin you and me can do about it. That’s for the folks in Washington, and they sure don’t get nothin right anymore.”

“Exactly,” I say.

“All they care about is takin what little money we got for taxes and gettin theyselves elected, and I don’t see why they even bother gettin theyselves elected anymore, always the same people win and almost nobody votin anyway. If I got to look at the President

get hisself up on teevee one more time and lie again about how the economy be turnin around at last, I think I'm just about gonna scream."

"I hear that," I say. Karen be so funny she always make me smile.

"And I'm not the only one that feel that way. But anybody do anythin about it? Not for love or money!"

Now, that make me nervous, cause you never know. "You talk a little softer there, Karen. You know these walls are thin like paper."

"Oh, what do I care what anybody hear me say? Everybody say the same thing, and nobody does anythin about it anyway. Nobody does anythin, cause everybody's too busy just tryin to get by and keep they kids from starvin. Good lord, whoever would've thought things'd come to this? Well, I did, but I always did think ahead. I saw the writin on the wall way back, the stock market goin down and companies sendin all they jobs overseas, and then the quake happen and that's all it took, that little push, and it all come crashin down. I see it all right. That's why, no matter what, I make sure we put somethin away every paycheck, and not in any stocks or 401k either. Just in a good solid bank where it could earn a little interest and not disappear all of a sudden. But what'd it get me? We're livin on that savings, otherwise Steve and me'd be just as hungry as everybody else, and the banks they don't pay no interest. Steve can't hardly get any day work just to put a few more dollars in our pocket, and I haven't worked in more than a year, can't even find any bookkeepin work to do."

"Least you got some savins to be livin on, Karen. Don and I . . . we never had too much in the bank, and he took the little bit there was."

Karen get real mad, she always get mad when I talk about how Don took our little bit of money. She smack her coffee cup down on the table and that noise wake up Tommy in the other room and he give a little yelp, but he quiet down real quick again.

Karen say a little quieter then, cause of the baby, "That son of a bitch, walkin out on his own wife and kid and not even havin the decency to let you know where he went!"

I don't even start to cry. "It wasn't enough to make any difference, not really."

"Sara, you're either a saint or the stupidest woman alive," she say. "He's a son of a bitch. If Steve ever did anythin like that to me, he wouldn't get halfway down the street before I came after him with a baseball bat!"

That make me laugh. "I can just see you chasin after Steve with a bat!" Steve with his bald head and his short little legs, and Karen a good head taller than him with her great big bosom like I use to wish I had.

"Oh, I can move pretty fast when I got somethin I need to do."

"I just bet you can."

"That's what I'd be doin if I were you, when that son of a bitch walk out."

"We don't got a bat."

"You come borrow mine. Unless I be usin it."

We both laugh at that.

"All this time," she say, "all this time he be gone, not a call or a letter, and I never hear you say one word against that son of a bitch."

I shake my head. "I married him. He be my husband. If I say he be bad, don't that make me look bad, for marryin him? And anyway, I'm not sayin anythin bad about him in case Tommy hear me. I don't want him thinkin bad about his own dad."

"Either a saint or the stupidest woman alive."

Karen go back downstairs and I spend too much time thinkin about my Don. I never could stay really mad at him walkin out on us, cause I know too much what he was goin through to make him do it. No work, watchin us usin up all our little bit of money that we work so hard to save up, me gettin fired from my own job in the laundry cause I have Tommee and the owners don't let me come back to work after. And somethin I never tell nobody, not even Karen: that Don walk out, but he try to get me to go with him first.

"This town is over," he say to me. "We got to get ourselves somewhere decent, where there's some work, where we can take care of ourselves, and where I don't have to be scared somethin's goin to happen to you every time you go out the door for anythin."

That was the day we find out Mrs. Braddon upstairs got beat up when she go out to the supermarket. "But where we go? Where could we go?" I say to him.

"I don't know!" He always start yellin when he get hisself all worked up and feelin lost. "But we got to get away from this town before somethin bad happen!"

"Nothin bad happenin here that don't happen everywhere else."

"If we go somewhere else we can handle anythin," he say back at me. "But if somethin bad happen here, there just be too damn many people, and everythin be worse. What if there be some new disease come up?

They talk about it all the time. Here there be so damn many people that everybody would be catchin it, but if we could go somewhere else there wouldn't be so many people and we could keep away from those that got it. Here you can't keep away from anybody. Half the people sleepin on the streets cause they can't pay they rent, and all it take is one bad disease and we all die. Or if the economy go down even worse, then what? Ten million people on this little bit of dirt, and all of them starvin? What you think goin to happen then? Sara, we got to get out of here."

"They won't let anythin like that happen," I say back to him.

"They can't be stoppin somethin like that! And what could they do anyway? They just a bunch of usless fucks who don't care about nobody but they own selves. If things go down, they couldn't do nothin about it, and wouldn't if they could. We'd be on our own, and I'm not gonna try to get by on my own in this filthy goddamn town!"

"But where could we go?" I always say. "We don't know any place else. We don't know anybody outside the city, except those cousins of yours in Jersey, and you don't ever talk to them."

"I'm not goin to go bum off any of my relatives."

"Then where could we go? We got almost no money left—how we get anywhere? And even if we do get out and find someplace else to live, what we do when we get there? You know there don't be work anywhere else, you read the papers enough to know it. Neither one of us ever went to college, we can't get ourselves any kind of decent job."

"I'll find somethin! I work on air conditioners and furnaces, for God's sake, people always need that kind of work done!"

"Every town in the country already got hundreds of people standin in line waitin for that kind of work. And I just do cleanin, what else could I do?"

"We got to *think* of somethin!"

"At least here we got the apartment, all paid for," I say.

"We got to sell it."

"Sell it!" I don't believe he could say that. "Who could buy it? Nobody got enough money!"

"Somebody'd buy it."

"Not for anywhere near what it's worth. Not for even what my daddy pay for it!"

"I don't want to hear again about you daddy! We'd get somethin for it, and that's more than we got. That'd give us the money to get out of here."

I make myself get calm again. "Listen, Donny. Somewhere else we don't have nothin, not even a roof over our heads. And we got a baby, Don. We can't just be packin up and hittin the road. We got Tommy to think about."

He couldn't even answer me back. This be my folks' apartment, they bought it way back when things was easy, and Don and I move in here when we got married cause we could live here for nothin, just for a while till we get on our feet. We move out for a couple years into a little apartment up in Inwood, but Don don't like it up there, it take him so long to get to work, and then my mama get sick and I have to take care of her till she die, so we move back in with my folks. Then my daddy die too and we get the apartment

for ourselves. By then I had Tommy and it save us so much money, only havin to pay maintenance, that of course we got to stay. How could I leave my home to go off somewhere we don't know anybody, with no sure place to live in and me with a little baby? I grow up in this apartment. I never live anywhere but New York. It scare me, thinkin about goin to live somewhere else. But Don be from Illinois, he don't feel about it the way I feel about it. It just a cheap place to live in a neighborhood that maybe don't be so good as it use to be.

I say everythin quiet and reasonable, tryin to get him to calm down. It always work before. But that time he smash his fist right into the wall and leave the room.

I see it eatin at him. He go out every day lookin for work, sometimes findin somethin for a day or two, usually not findin anythin. He don't sleep good at night, he start lookin gray and sick. Some days he be better than others, but he never act happy, not even for a minute or two.

Then one night he start up on it again. "We got to get out! Somethin bad happen and we are stuck here on this damn island with ten million hungry people!" And he's yellin so loud that Tommy start screamin in his bed, and I couldn't hardly stand it.

"I'm not leavin my home," I say. I go in and pick Tommy up out of his crib and hold him up close against me. "I'm not goin someplace I never even been before and just hope things work out. We got a home here. I'm not leavin it."

"I'm not askin you again," he say back to me. His voice was real low and quiet then, and that scare me even more than his yellin. "I'm tellin you, we are goin."

I say again, just as quiet as him, "I'm not leavin my home."

Don yell, "That's it! With or without you, I'm gettin myself out of here!"

So he go. I think he just be mad and he come back in the mornin. But he don't come back. He don't come back in the mornin, he don't come back in the evenin, and when I go to the bank machine to get some of our money for groceries I find every bit of our money gone, except the couple hundred I keep in the apartment for emergencies.

Then I do get mad, almost mad enough to go after him with a baseball bat like Karen say. But I don't know where he go, so I can't go after him. And I got Tommy to take care of. My little boy. Two year old and his daddy run away from him.

I don't stay mad too long. I get scared instead. That's almost as bad as bein mad.

Anyway, how can I stay mad? If I stay mad, I just make myself sick, and then I make Tommy sick. Cause that kind of bein mad work like poison on people, and turn them bad. I don't want Tommy growin up mad. I want him to stay a happy little boy. I can't give him a daddy anymore, but I can at least try to keep him a happy little boy.

* * *

Keisha's boy Pac help me get a job in his Chinee company, cleanin the offices at night. It don't pay

much, but it pay more than doin nothin, and I was so grateful I go out soon as I get my first paycheck and buy that boy a CD I hear him say he been wantin.

Course, me bein workin now I don't get the government check I was gettin. And between payin taxes, and payin for food I use to get with the stamp program, and payin for the daycare for Tommy to be in mornins so I can get some sleep and don't be botherin Karen, and the little bit of money I give Karen for helpin me with Tommy, and even the money I have to pay to get to and from work on the busses that I didn't have to come up with when I wasn't workin, sometimes it seem like I got less money than I did before I get the job.

It's not the greatest work in the world, but it don't be as hard as the laundry most of the time, and I always say the Lord will provide and here he be providin me, so I don't say anythin against it. I got to be at work at five in the afternoon and I work through till one in the mornin. Even at that time there always be Chinee people workin away in they offices. One of the other girls on the crew, her name Jemma, she say to me, "Look at them crazy yellow SOBs! They got theyselves all the money left in the world, why the hell don't they go home and get a little sleep sometimes?"

"Why you think they got all the money left in the world?" another of the girls say. "Cause they work theyselves so damn hard. If our fine American boys'd done like that, maybe they would've kept some of that money for theyselves."

"Huh," say Jemma, "my husband always work hard as anybody, and it don't get us nowhere!"

That just about be startin a fight, cause when you get people talkin about where the money go it always lead to somebody gettin mad. So I just get on about my work and keep my head down.

There be plenty of work to think about, so I don't have to be worryin about where any money go, except my own little bit. I get home about two, two-thirty in the mornin and pick up Tommy from Karen's downstairs. I get to sleep till six or six-thirty, and then it's time to get Tommy up and get him off to his daycare. I shouldn't be spendin the money on it, but he need to play with other kids, and I need to get him out of the house for a few hours so I can get some real sleep. I go back to pick him up again in time for lunch, and we get to be together till almost three, when I take him back down to Karen and I start downtown to work. It always take a long time to get to work in the afternoon. Either the bus don't come, or it break down, or it have to go on a detour. So I always give myself plenty of time to be sure I don't be late. I give Karen a little money every week for her watchin Tommy. She fight me at first over it, but she give in, since they need the money pretty bad now. Karen's been sick with her back for almost a year and can't even do the little bit of work she use to, and while Steve get hisself some work once in a while, mostly workin construction down by the river where they puttin up the levees, it come and go. So they can use the money I give them for watchin Tommy.

"I got myself a piece of luck," I say to Karen, "so of course I got to spread it around to my friends."

"I always say you either a saint or just stupid, but I'm startin to lean toward the saint idea."

That make me kind of embarrassed. “You helpin me out with Tommy so much, I owe you big.”

“You know we’re just happy to have him around, he’s a real good boy and easy to watch out for. He don’t cause any trouble.”

That make me feel good. My little boy be so good. Course I watch out careful and don’t let him get started on any bad ways. He got his friends from the daycare and a couple boys in the buildin he play with, but I don’t let him run on the streets like some people do with they kids. The streets be too rough for little kids to be set loose on. There be more gangs even than when I was a kid, and it seem like the kids in them be meaner than I remember.

He help me around the house, too, as much as a little kid can. But I got to say, the apartment be lookin pretty bad. I just don’t get to be home enough to keep it up the way I use to. My mama wouldn’t be happy with that. But when do I get a chance to clean? I either be goin to work, or comin back from work, or takin Tommy to his daycare, or pickin him up again, or tryin to get a little sleep in between before I start the whole thing over again. Saturdays be the only time I really get to clean, and then I be so tired I can’t hardly do more than dust and sweep and scrub up the kitchen a bit. No, my mama wouldn’t be happy at all with the way the place is lookin most of the time. But we all do what we can, and Tommy help some. He keep his own room picked up good.

I’m real careful at work to clean everythin perfect. Now I got a job I can't afford to be playin around. But some of the women, they just act like it don't matter whether they get fired or not. They the kind of women

I use to see way back when I was young, before I meet Don, and workin in a real estate office doin filin, the kind of women who sit at they desks and talk on the phone all the time, and when they bosses come up and give them work, they just smile and set it down and get on with they calls. I always wonder how women like that could keep a job, and I wonder the same about a couple of these women on my crew, too.

But that's only one or two of them, and not all the time. When the shift boss do his rounds at midnight, everybody act like they workin hard, even if just for that few minutes. Most of the other girls work as hard as I do. They know there don't be jobs like there use to be, and they better keep hold of the one they got.

It's not a bad job. There be some little benefits. Lots of times there be food left around in the conference rooms after some late meetin, and then we get to eat what's left. Sometimes there be so much I can even take some home, and that help out quite a bit. Most of the women don't have kids, so if there be some tray of cookies left around they always slip me a couple extra for Tommy. And then the company got free juice and soda in they kitchens for they people, and once in a while we can take one for our own selves. I don't do that much, it make me feel funny, and anyway, I always get scared I might get caught, and then what would I do? But if it's really late and I know for sure the office people already gone home, then sometimes I do take a Coke or a orange juice. I hope that don't be wrong.

Sundays I dress Tommy up in his white shirt and his little clip-on tie, and I put on my cleanest skirt, and we go to church. By Sunday I don't usually got much

left over, but I always try to put at least a dollar in the collection. I let Tommy do it. He thinks it's important, he get all serious and hold the dollar in his hand real tight, so it can't fall, till the collection plate come to us. Then he lay it in so careful, and if there be a lot of change in the plate he always put the dollar bill under some of the change, so it won't blow out of the plate. There usually be a good bit of change in the plate. No matter how bad things be, people always seem to be able to find a little somethin for God, even if it's only pocket money.

Karen never say nothin out loud, but I know she think it be stupid for me to give my money to the church. I heard her say once to one of our other neighbors, "I'm not one to be pointin my finger, but how come everybody goin in those big double doors is skinny as a Q-Tip but the priest inside stay fat as a pig?" That be funny if it wasn't so wicked.

It's in bad times like these you see what people really think. God come back into your life in a big way when you havin trouble makin do, and every church be packed come Sunday mornin, and most nights for evenin mass, too. There just be somethin nice and comfortin about gettin together with other people to sing and listen to the priest talk, and take you little sip of wine and know that God's watchin out for you, no matter how bad things get. Karen don't believe at all. I give her a little booklet once that I pick up at the church after mass, called "His Eye Is On The Sparrow." I thought she might like it cause I read it my own self and it made me feel nice. But she just hand it back to me and say, "Sara, you my best friend and I love you, and you can think whatever you want. But I be an

atheist and happy with it, so don't hand me this stuff anymore, okay, honey?"

She wasn't nasty at all, she just let me know she don't want to hear about God. I can't understand it myself, but she be my best friend and that's that. I almost say back to her, "Well, God don't care whether you believe in Him or not, He believe in you, and that's enough." But I didn't. I don't think she would appreciate it.

So I don't say nothin about it anymore to Karen. Tommy and I go down Sunday mornins and take communion and sit with nice people, sing some pretty hymns, and I know I'm doin what I should for him, bringin him up right, so he believe. Cause you got to believe.

There be a girl on the crew, Joy Lacala. She believe, but she go overboard, I think. She be one of those Jehovah Witnesses and she always be pushin some book or other at you. We all be nice to her, of course, cause she a nice enough woman, but it does get to be annoyin, her shovin those little books at you expectin you to thank her, and the color ink always comin off on you fingers. I'm glad I never be so bad as that! I just try to pass off that one book to Karen, and never again! But I can see where people get tired of it. Joy always be talkin about Our Lord this and Our Lord that, till you think Our Lord peekin at her in the john to make sure she go to the bathroom the right way! Some people just take things too far. God be watchin us, all right, sure, but maybe he got somethin more important to do than keep track of my bathroom visits!

Joy say one night on break that God send the earthquake to punish the world for bein so wicked, and

bring the Chinee companies over here to make Americans slaves cause we be so godless and sinful because of the gays and the drugs and all that. Well, of course that lead to a fight. Most of us just roll our eyes and look at our watches, but Millie Irizarry stand right up from the table we sittin at and say back at her, "Oh, so God killed a million Japanees and a couple million other people around the world just to punish a few fags and some people smokin weed?" Millie get kind of crude when she get mad.

Joy just draw her mouth in all tight. "Sin got to be punished, and cause we let those people—"

Millie don't even let her get started. "Well, you damn God got a funny way of punishin a few fags! Killin millions of people and ruinin everybody's lives just to get even with a couple guys blowin each other!"

Joy couldn't come up with anythin better than, "Mysterious are the ways of the Lord."

"Too fuckin mysterious!" Millie say. "If he got a gripe with somebody, why not take it out on them? Why get everybody else on the planet involved? Anyway, I thought that damn God you keep talkin about was suppose to be all-merciful and all-forgiving? Shit! Sound like a pretty nasty son of a bitch to me, killin millions of people just to get even with somebody! And if America was so damn full of fags that we got to be punished, then why did he fuck with Japan? Why not open up the U.S. and swallow it up to hell? Why wreck Japan and the whole world so that Costa Rica and Peru and every place else get screwed? How come my papi got to catch typhus and die after that damn wave hit Nicaragua and nobody got any food or medicine for three months? My papi didn't

smoke pot! My papi wasn't any fag! He didn't even *know* any fags! You fuckin god! If there do be a god, and he do what you say he do, then he be a damn bastard son of a bitch and he can go to hell!"

Millie walk away mad as anythin. Joy wait till she get out of the break room, then she say, "That woman gonna burn in hell and that is all I got to say!"

"Well, that'll be a first," Jemma say real low so only I can hear it.

"Her father die," I say to Joy, tryin to make everythin easy. "He got sick and die cause of this disaster. Naturally she get upset when she think somebody talkin against him."

"She a heathen and a foul-talkin harlot," Joy say, "but what you expect from a woman brought up Catholic?"

Well. Just about everybody in the room stand up and walk out right then without sayin a word, since most all of us be Catholic. Naturally we don't put ourselves around Joy any more than we got to after that. These Jehovah Witnesses got they own crazy ideas how things be.

Millie tell me another time that she don't believe in God either. "I use to go to church, sure. My folks always take me, and I do it cause I think that what you suppose to do. But when I get older I start seein how things really are, and I start wonderin if there be any room for god in the world. And if there is, and he really do care at all about people, how he could let things be so bad as they are most of the time? Then that Tokyo quake happen, and everythin fall apart, till there don't look like there be any bottom to how low we can go. My papi die from fever down there in

Managua, cause there just don't be any money or medicine, and the American companies that do they business down there, workin the people half to death for next to nothin, just cause people work cheaper down there than they do here, they wouldn't do nothin to help, not even they own workers. I got that letter from my sister tellin me how our papi die, and how bad off they doin, and that's when I know for sure there wasn't no god. That's when I grow up.

"Sooner or later you got to grow up. You got to look at the world around you and see it for what it is, not what the white guy in the funny hat tell you it is. And if you take a good look at the world, then how could anybody believe in a god? Or if you do, you got to think he is one sick son of a bitch. No, he just be a excuse for people to say 'everythin be better later, so I don't got to do anythin now.' Well, that be bullshit. Nobody do anythin now, and what happen? Look around you. This world. That what happen. And there don't be nobody and nothin watchin out for any of us."

I don't try sayin anythin back to her then. She be all upset and I don't like makin people more upset than they already be. She have somethin bad happen to her papi, and she can't be thinkin straight. All that talk about losin god and growin up, like they the same thing. Poor girl. She gonna wake up one of these days and see she be wrong. She got to be wrong. Course there be a god. Course He be lookin out for us. Especially when things be bad, like now. He always be watchin out for us. Cause if there don't be any god, then what be the point of even tryin to live when things be like this?

* * *

Monday through Friday I drop Tommy off at Karen's downstairs, then I go to catch the bus on Broadway. Walkin to the bus stop I got to pass all the people sellin they crap on the street. Seems like every day there be more people with old bedsheets spread out and all they old stuff on it, shoes and clothes, pots and skillets, books nobody read before and never gonna read. There always be a bunch of women goin through the stuff, holdin up the skirts and shirts to see if there be any holes in them, but I almost never see anybody actually buy anythin. I was thinkin about tryin to sell some of my old stuff, maybe Don's clothes, the things he didn't take with him. But I don't like the idea of haulin all that stuff out to the street and layin it out for people to pick through. Sittin on the sidewalk all day hopin somebody give me a dollar for a old pair of pants. It just turn my stomach. So I leave all Don's things in the closet. They don't take up much room. Anyway, I don't got time for such things, now I got a job. I look at the stuff they sell sometimes, sure, if the bus don't come when it suppose to. But I got too little money to throw it away on other people's junk. I don't buy none of it. Unless I see somethin Tommy could maybe wear and can get it real cheap.

That long bus ride down to 42 Street. It feel like it get longer and longer each time I got to do it. Even without all the cars to make traffic like the old days, it still take forever. The streets get worse and worse, with holes that they don't ever fix and detours around construction. At least the hybrid busses got big windows so you don't feel all cooped up when you get

stuck for a long time, and they got nice seats, too. Not that I usually get to sit down, there be so many people tryin to get somewhere, even that late in the day. Use to be that time of day you could travel downtown quick and always get a seat, cause everybody be workin. But half the train tunnels are shut down cause they flood every time it rain a little, and the other trains break down so much, people stuck in those hot tunnels for hours till the conductors make them all walk out along the tracks to get back up to the street, that almost nobody dare to ride in them anymore. So I only take the busses.

It take me close to a hour to get down to Times Square, if nothin go wrong. Then I get off and walk down to 39 Street to the office. The buildin only got the one company in it now, Jiang Long. I can't even pronounce the name right! They got seventeen of the thirty-nine floors in the buildin. The rest just sit there dark and we don't go in them but maybe once every couple months when the supervisor get the idea we should clean them up in case some company want to rent the space. Like that ever gonna happen. But the supervisor'll get a itch to do somethin, so we all go into one or two of the empty floors and spend a weekend scrubbin and dustin and pretendin to make it look like somethin. At least we get us some overtime pay, but after I pay the extra taxes they take out and give Karen more for takin Tommy the two extra days, it don't add up to much.

We always start cleanin the company floors around five-thirty or six, so we see lots of the Chinee bosses. They always be real polite and say "hello" and "good evenin" to me when I come in with my cart. The

American workers don't usually say nothin, they don't even look up from they computers to know we there. And they go home before the Chinee do. The Chinee, they stay workin real late, most of them. I never see people work so hard. The supervisor tell me most of them only come over here to this country to work for a year, then they go back to China and get promotions. I guess that be why most of them are so young. Some of them don't look old enough to buy a drink! But the Chinee, they got such nice skin I guess they just don't show they age. The top managers, of course, are older, and look it, too. And of course they all be men.

One night I was makin the first rounds, emptyin the trash cans from under all the desks, and one of the office doors was shut. I went to knock on it to see if I could go in and get the trash can—if I don't do it first time around I got to make a special trip after everybody go home, and by then I'm so tired and Charlee's got the big vacuum out doin the carpet, that I don't like to wheel my cart over it once he's got it lookin fluffy and nice. So I start to knock on the door and one of the Chinee guys sittin at a desk outside the office look up and say to me, "Don't go in! He's on a conference call."

I smile at him. "Thanks." He a nice-lookin kid, probably only about twenty-five.

He smile too and then sit back away from his computer and stretch. "Whew! End of the day, heh?" he say.

I point at my cart. "My day just startin up."

He nodded. "You work nights. I couldn't do that! It's bad enough I have to stay late most days. I don't feel like I ever get enough sleep."

He talk real good English for a Chinee. Lord knows I can't get out two words of Chinee. Oh, I know a little bit from the teevee, like "nee how" to say hello.

"I know just what you mean," I say. Then I realize I shouldn't be talkin to the company folks and I start off.

"You had your hair done," the Chinee man say as I start away.

I get real surprised. Karen and me gave each other home permanents over that weekend and nobody on the crew noticed at all, but here this young Chinee guy did!

I think I probably blushed, cause he smile bigger. "Yes, I did," I say back to him.

He just grin and say, "It looks pretty."

I don't know how I thought to say it, but I say, "Me koi nayee." That means thank you in Chinee. I don't know where I learned that, probably from the teevee, too.

Now *he* look real surprised and say back to me, "You speak Chinese!"

"No, no!" I shake my head and try to get on down the hall. I was feelin really embarrassed by then. "Just that!"

"You said it well."

I put my head down like I was lookin at my cart for somethin. "I better get on with my work. Good night." And I hurry on down the hall to the next set of offices before he can say any more. But later I realize I was thinkin about it the whole time I was workin the floor. It was kind of nice, havin a good-lookin young man sayin somethin nice to me about how I look. It be two years since Don walk out, and I sure don't ever think about goin with another man since then, especially a

Chinee. I wouldn't do it even now. But it still be nice, havin somebody talk about how I look and bein nice with me.

I tell Karen about it that weekend, and she give me a long look. "Well, why you should be surprised I don't know. There's plenty of guys lookin at you all the time. You just don't pay attention."

"There is?" I say. I don't care, of course, but sometimes it feel good to hear it.

"Course there is. I see it all the time when we go out. They sure aren't lookin at me! You a pretty girl and I don't know why you sittin around all by youself."

When Karen start talkin like that I just don't pay any attention, or I change the subject. I don't like thinkin about such stupid things. I'm still married, and I'm happy with just Tommy. He's all the man I need in my life. One time Karen tell me, "Steve's brother Noah, every time he come to visit he always ask how you gettin along." I met Steve's brother Noah more than a couple times. He look a lot like Steve. Nice enough guy, but I sure never think of him *that* way.

"I don't," I say to her when she keep after me, "I honestly don't think about bein with a man more than every once in a while. I'm just too busy workin and takin care o Tommy, and I really just don't care about ever bein with another man again."

"Huh. You too young to be thinkin like that. Two years since that Don walk off and here you are still all alone. Time to get off you butt and start shakin it!"

"I surely don't feel young."

"You workin youself to death," she say. "This job is killin you, keepin you up all night and I know you

don’t get more than a couple hours of sleep, not real good sleep, even after Tommy go to daycare in the mornin.”

“What else can I do? There don’t be so many jobs that I can just go out and find another one.”

“Sometimes I think you was better off when you wasn’t workin, just gettin the government food and able to take it a little easy.”

I grin at that. “Sometimes I think you right.”

And I do, too. Sometimes I be so tired I can’t hardly push my cart around the office. I see the other women like that too, toward the end of the shift, around two or three in the mornin, lookin like they don’t know where they are or what they doin, eyes with nothin behind them, gettin the last vacuumin done or the last counter scrubbed. None of the Chinee or the American workers left in they offices then, most of the copy machines and printers and computers turned off, the only noise the wheels on our carts goin tick tick tick, not even the shh sound from the air conditioner since they turn it off at eight in the night to save on electricity, and it get so hot in that building durin the summer you can’t hardly breathe. Just quiet and dark hallways and empty-eyed women pushin toward that long bus ride home.

Then I get home and I pick up Tommy. He always be sound asleep. He don't move at all when I carry him upstairs to our own home and put him in his bed, even when he’s all twisted cockeyed from sleepin on Karen’s couch. Then I be so tired I can’t sleep, so I turn on the teevee and keep the sound real low so Tommy won’t wake up, and I sit there till my eyes start to ache so bad I start to cry. Not because I’m sad, just because

my eyes hurt. Then it's finally time to get Tommy up and feed him some oatmeal and get him dressed and walk him over to the daycare on 104, in the old Community Center. I finally get back home and put myself in my bed, and I sleep for three or four hours, till it be time to go get Tommy again and make us our lunch.

Every two weeks we come in early cause they hand out our paychecks and I go over to 40 and Lexington with the other girls to cash mine. I try to put ten or twenty dollars away, if I can, but most times I just can't do even that little bit. Still, I managed to get a few dollars ahead last week and bought us two boxes of Clairol home permanent for Karen and me, and we did each other's hair. A girl want to do somethin now and then to make herself feel pretty, even if she don't intend to do anythin with it. The permanent made Karen's hair go a kind of funny brassy color. Mine turned out real good. That's when the Chinee guy at the office tell me I look nice.

Sometimes I do wonder if it wouldn't be better just givin up and goin back on the government food. I think how much I'd like to sleep, sleep a whole day, if I didn't have anythin I have to do. Maybe I could get rid of these circles under my eyes. Maybe I could really look as young as I am, and somebody else could tell me I look nice again.

* * *

The word come out Monday night at work: they cuttin us down to three nights a week only, and we got to work ten hour shifts instead of eight, and they

gonna put on a double shift on Saturdays for only two workers, to make up for all the stuff we can't get done on the short week. They goin to rotate the two who got to do the double shift on Saturdays, so everybody get one extra day a month. But they still cuttin our pay down to only a little more than two-thirds what we gettin now.

"This was the fairest way we could come up with to handle the problem," say the supervisor, "so that we wouldn't have to lay anybody off. Otherwise we got to let at least half of you go. This way you all get to keep you jobs, and if you can find somethin else that'll take you back up to full time, then you're welcome to go, no hard feelins."

If I could, I'd keep Tommy out of the daycare on Tuesdays and Thursdays, when I won't be workin, but the damn daycare center still make me pay for the whole five days, so I can't save any money that way. And now one Saturday a month I got to ask Karen to take Tommy for the whole day and most of the night, cause I'll be working eight in the mornin to ten at night, and that mean I got to give her a little more money. Of course she tell me I don't got to give her anything extra, but of course I got to. "Tommy's just a pleasure to have around, and anyway, you don't got to send him down now when you off durin the week, so it all come out even," she say. But Karen and Steve be hurtin so bad, with neither one of them workin, Karen at the doctor all the time, and all they savins gone, I got to help them out if I can. They help me so much.

I don't know how I make myself work a fourteen-hour shift—I can't hardly get through the eight hours I

do now, and nine hours sometimes when there be some special job we doin.

Course nobody else on the crew is happy about it either. How could they be? Everybody got too many bills, too high rent, and not enough comin in as it is. Now we gettin even less. Some of the supervisors try to make it sound like it be somethin good, them givin us another couple days off every week. "I'll take them days," Millie say, "but I take that money a whole lot faster. Can't buy food with free time." But most of the bosses don't play that two-face game. They know just as good as us how hard it'll be, gettin by. They be people too, even if sometimes you don't want to believe it. They get they salaries cut just like us, and they got to work the longer hours too. Mr. Verne, the main supervisor on my shift, tell me private that the buildin can't afford to keep us all workin full time anymore, not with most of the floors empty and no sign of any other companies comin in, not even Chinee, and naturally no American companies able to pay for the space. "So we got a couple years out of them full time," he say. "Now they see there's no light at the end of this damn tunnel, they got to cut back. So we got to cut back with them. At least we still got some work."

Yeah, at least we still got some work. Unemployment be so bad, I don't think ten people in my buildin got jobs, and I don't know how the rest of them gettin by. Karen and Steve scrapin by on the government food relief, and sellin off little things they got that still be worth some money, like some decent jewelry Karen got from her mama, and Steve pickin up odd jobs here and there, when somebody need help

buildin somethin, or one of his friends needin an extra hand fixin up old computers for some company or other that still barely goin.

Pac, Keisha's boy who help me get my job, got laid off hisself, now she only got her own job to keep her and her husband and the three boys goin. Sometimes I actually feel glad Don walk out on me when he did, and that I only got little Tommy to watch out for. If I had another kid, or two like some people, I don't know what I be doin.

I don't see Keisha much at all these days, but I know her boys be doin somethin illegal to help bring in some money. You can't blame them. Least they doin somethin to help. I run into her once in a while when she go downtown on weekends to pick up the food the government start handin out. She look so tired and her skin all grey and dusty, her eyes with dark circles under them, and she almost never have her hair done up neat like she use to. "Yeah," she tell me once, "they lay off over half the people in my office and the rest of us doin ten- or twelve-hour days to keep up. You work so hard, then you get you paycheck and it seem like there ain't enough there to keep a skinny dog goin a week. And the taxes, they goin up again!"

"I don't know how you keep you whole family goin with just what you makin," I say back to her.

"The boys help out some," she say real quiet. "I don't like it, but I don't ask questions. Nobody help you, you got to help you own self. They do what they got to do to help out they folks and keep us all alive and halfway decent." She sound like she expect me to say somethin, but I don't say nothin about it. I know how things be and what people got to do.

Now I get home after three or even three-thirty in the mornin, and I don't like walkin the streets that time of night. But the busses they be on the reduced schedules and it take me more than a couple hours to get back uptown. I could almost get home faster walkin, except I be so tired and the streets be so dark, with most of the lights off or busted, so it don't be safe walkin.

It happen last Saturday night, or Sunday morning, when I be comin home. It was about twelve-thirty, it was my Saturday to do the double shift and they keep us a little later even than usual. Then the bus don't come, and don't come, and when one finally show up it got so many people on it I can't even get on, so I start walkin uptown, hopin I can pick up another bus a little farther on. But I walk more than twenty blocks before I see another bus, and that one don't stop for me. So I keep walkin. I'm so tired by that time I can't hardly see where I'm goin. I see there don't be no use lookin for another bus, so I get off Broadway and go over to Amsterdam and keep headin uptown. I walk by the church on 99 and then I'm walkin past the old schoolyard where they use to play softball and basketball on the weekends. The Astroturf they put down a few years back is all tore up now and most of the lights don't work on that couple of blocks. I was just too tired, or I wouldn't ever walk up that way. There's a police station and a firehouse there, but they was shut down a couple years ago and everythin's dark. There was some kids on the other side of the street in front of the bodega, about seven, eight kids in they big tee shirts and skinny jeans. I don't think they was even twelve years old, most of them, and I was

thinkin, what the hell do they mamas think, lettin they kids wander around out on the streets this time of night? Even if it is Saturday!

All of a sudden a man comes out from behind the fence there where they use to have a swimmin pool for the kids in the summer, in between the police buildin and the old school. He look like he high on somethin, walkin slow and holdin one hand tight up against his chest. I don't give him a second look, I just go on a little faster, but not too fast, cause I don't want him to think I be scared, that's a bad thing to do. I don't look back, but I could hear him comin up behind me, fast, and I start to get worried, I start breathin fast, I can't help it.

The man behind me come up real quick before I get to the corner and take hold of my arm at the elbow. I jump a foot and turn on him real fast.

"Where you goin so fast, mama?" he say. He was a good-sized man, bigger than Don, maybe six one, and skinny like most of the street folk I see during the daytime. Black man, with a bushy beard and not a lot of hair on top of his head. He smell of beer and cigarette smoke. I don't know how people without any money always manage to get they hands on smoke and booze, but they do, and the stink come off of him like a fist.

My heart start goin a mile a minute, and I could taste the bad dry taste of fear in my mouth. But my brain slow way down and I could think all these different thoughts in just a second: Should I scream and try to get some of those kids over to help me? I could see them watchin us. Should I just try to run?

Should I try to get my keys out so I could hit him in the eyes if he don't let me go?

I decide, real calm, to stand up to him, cause a lot of the time these street folks back down if you just give them some strong words.

"I'm goin home, so you just let go of me now," I say to him. I hope it sounds strong and mad, but I can hear my voice shake.

He come in close to me and say real low, "Just walk on normal, Mama. You see them boys over there across the street? They been raisin hell all night. I see them grab a girl a couple hours ago and they slap her around. If they was a little older, they'd be doin more. So why don't you just let me walk you up there to the corner where you goin, just to make sure they don't be messin with you?"

I be so scared then I don't know what to do, this big man holdin onto my arm and talkin shit to me. But I look over across the street, and those boys *are* all lookin at us, and I can't tell if they lookin cause this guy come up and grab me, or cause they checkin me out to see if I be worth messin with. I don't know what to do.

But the man standin with me say, "I see you out here all the time, mama. You live up there on 105, right? I just walk you up to the corner there, then you can go on by you own self. Come on, mama."

He start walkin me up the street. We cross 102 and then we go past the big brick buildin that use to be the youth hostel. There always use to be a lot of young people hangin out there, people from other countries visitin, but now nobody comes visitin and the hostel shut down and there be some squatters in there. I don't

like to walk past it at night. There always be a few people sittin out front on some old picnic tables and chairs where the foreign visitors use to sit, smokin but keepin theyselves low out of sight in case the police come by. Cause nobody suppose to be in the buildin, it got condemned signs all over it, though they be all faded from rain and snow and that.

All the time he walkin me up the street, the man holdin my elbow talk to me. "Don't want to be messin with that gang of kids," he say to me, "they always out all night fuckin people up. They little but they mean. Just little kids, but you get that many together they can do you some harm, mama. It just be pathetic, them out behavin like this. Little kids, shit, can't even trust little kids. I don't know what be happenin to the world. You shouldn't ought to be walkin out this late at night, what's the matter, no busses runnin? Nothin ever workin in this city. And you want to watch goin past the hostel, mama, there some ugly shit goin down in there. People gettin fucked up, might do you some harm not even meanin to. I see them hollerin and beatin they own selves up sometime, they so high. I don't mess with that shit. I don't blame them for it, what else they got to do with theyselves? But I don't mess with that myself. Just a drink or two, when I can get it. A man got to have some sort of self respect or what he do botherin to stay alive? If you act like a animal, you might as well be dead. A man got to keep some self respect. Now here we be at you corner. See them kids still over there?"

I look back, and that gang of little kids be trailin us from across the street, watchin but actin like they not watchin.

"See? They follow us, you hear what I'm sayin? Now, you go on home. I won't go with you here, you don't know me from Adam, you don't want my smelly old self takin you to you door. But I stay here on this corner till you get in so them kids don't get any idea about comin over and catchin you inside. Go on, mama, and keep youself off these streets after it get dark. If there don't be no busses, you just sit you ass down and wait till one come. Gettin home's not worth gettin youself messed up. Goodnight, mama, goodnight."

I manage to say "Thank you" to the street man, then I hurry away and get myself in my own buildin fast as I could go. My heart beatin so hard I thought maybe I was goin to have to say goodbye to this world, my hand shakin so hard I couldn't hardly work the key into the lock. But I got upstairs to Karen's and sat down right on the dirty floor outside her door till I got my breath back and my heart slow down a little. That took a good long while. Then I let myself in and pick up little Tommy off the couch where they had him sleepin under some old sheets. He didn't wake up at all the whole time I carry him upstairs, just lay kinked up in my arms, one leg stickin out straight, his hair bird-nested, and smellin like soap. Karen got him to take a bath that night. I get inside our apartment and sit down on the couch with him in my arms, smellin his clean smell, huggin him and rockin him. And thinkin, How am I ever goin to get myself to go outside this apartment again? How am I ever goin to do it?

And then the sun come up and shined in through the window. It was Sunday, I was still shakin, but I

didn't have to go outside all day, not for anythin, not at all.

BOOK 3

TOMMEE

CHAPTER 1

I be walkin last night up 96 to Riverside where the park use to be before the water come up and cover it all. That be where a lot o us go at night cause the lights dont work over there, the cops cant see us so easy and they dont be comin over there so much. But nobody be on Riverside, so I go back up 95 by where the bank use to be. I be goin out to get away from mommee, she be talkin again, she be goin on and on about the old days before I get born and I dont need to hear that, I hear it too much already, she be crazy like that. I feelin kind o not so good, feelin that you-know feelin we all get sometime, specially now, when the sky stay gray so long. Needin some air, needin to maybe look at some people in they faces and make sure they be there. So I be walkin there by the pit where the bank use to be before they start buildin the new bank and then stop, and I hear my man Jerr callin out my name loud but careful, cause you know the cops they be somewhere around waitin for a excuse to get out they clubs. "Nee how, Tom man, where you go?"

Man, it feel good seein my man Jerr there on the street by the pit. I go up to he and give he the hand and we find a dark spot to shoot the shit and watch if any

people go by or cops come. He say the usual to me, I say it back to he, we be pretty easy with each other. Talkin this and that make me remember somethin I be wantin to ask for a while. "Where Chuckee?" I say to he. "I dont see he in a lo-hong time."

"Man," he say back at me, "dont you hear it? Tom man, you be so no. Chuckee, he be gone. He make the flee, he catch hisself a tick to Chungking."

This news make me like my brain get shot. "What huh? How he make the flee? You shittin my brain! Chuckee? He dont got no Chinee in he."

"Ya ya, he gramma, she Vietnammer. She get herself adopted when she a babee. That good enough for the Chinee."

"Man, they takin Nammers? Oh shit, why for?"

He laugh like I a dumb shit. "You dont watch the news, you dont know nothin. China, it take over Vietnam and it take over Koree too. Them Chinee, they got it all now, man. What they dont got, they dont want. They the winner now, Tom man, that where the dam dam money be. You want to be with the ho-chin winner, you get you sorry self to China."

I kick this somethin on the curb, it make a good big noise, but no cops come. "Oh shit, why my folks got to be white?"

"Dont you got no Chinee blood nowhere in you?" Jerr ask me. "Maybe your mommee, she get flat with a bank president way back when, huh?"

"Shit man, shit no, we be white all the way back to the first fuck." I kick the big noise somethin again. "No luck, man, no shittin luck."

"Same here, man. My mommee she be white, my daddee he be white, and my grammas and grampas

they all be white. No one ever do got the sense to even screw around some to provide for they kids."

I still be like I cant believe all this shit he tellin me. "Man, Jerr, I watch the news, sometimes," I say to he. "Cant watch it all the time, my mommee watch it all the time and it make she crazy, crazy, man. Make me crazy watchin she watchin it, so I get out. Dont like watchin it all the time. But I never hear China be takin over Vietnam and Koree. Man, where they get the money to do that with, huh man?"

"What you mean, where they get the money?" He smack he hand down on the wire fence that be around the pit. "Tom man, they own the world! What they need money for?"

I look at he now like he the dumb shit. "You got to have armies to be takin over countries, dont you? Armies, they cost money, man. You got to have lots o men and lots o guns in them armies, and they cost money. Man, we dont got no money in this dam place for nothing, but we got it for the cops. Look at this," I bang on the fence too, "they dont even got money to fix this dam dam fence so that maybe nobody fall into that big hole where a bank ought to be, but they got the money to keep the cops in bullets and pepper spray, dont they? So what I say is, where do China get the money to have the armies to be takin over countries?"

Jerr he shrug. "Man, I dont know, dont be askin me no questions about money. I dont know about money. I dont even know what it look like anymore. Anyway, they don't be takin over with no fuckin armies, they do it just by havin money and everybody else wantin to be part o them. Dont you think o that? Maybe Vietnam

and Koree *want* to be take over by China, you ever think o that? Maybe they be so poor or maybe they be likin them Chinee so much they say, 'Hey, come on in! Take us over, man!'" He laugh. He always think he be this real funny guy. "Why everybody over here who got any Chinee blood go back to China the minute they can? Cause that where the money be, o course. And the Nammers and the Korees be just the same as us. Follow the money, man, if they let you."

"Yeah, maybe," is all I say, but I be thinkin they got to be gettin money from somewhere and there not suppose to be no money left, that's what they always say on teevee. But the Chinee, they got some sort o money, dont they? They be runnin the banks that dont be holes in the ground, and be runnin the stores and be runnin the teevee stations too. So all I think is, there got to be money somewhere comin to the Chinee, cause everythin be theirs now.

Jerr start talkin about some stupid show he see on teevee that mornin, and he got to tell me all about it. Like I say, I watch teevee, but I dont watch it all the dam dam time. My mommee, she watch it all the time, that why she be crazy. That why she always talkin about how things use to be when there dont be so many cops and when the bank be there and my daddee be still livin with us and I be a baby and the park dont have no water on it and everybody got some money so they dont got to be hungry always. So me, I dont watch much teevee.

I lean back on the fence and it give under me a little, like it goin to fall into the pit. I jump back and Jerr, he laugh at me.

I still cant get over it. “I cant believe Chuckee be part Nammer. He dont look like a Nammer. He even got blue eyes like a whitey.”

“Dont mean nothin what he eyes be like.” Sometimes Jerr, he act just like he know every shittin thing in the whole world and just hang with me for the amusement o me bein dumb. “He gramma, she marry a whitey blond boy, and they kids, they marry more little blond whiteys, and there you go. Chuckee.”

“There you fuckin go.”

Jerr, he look away down the street. “I like that Chuckee, Tom man. I be glad he make the flee. He need somethin better than what we got here.” He make a big sigh like in the cartoons. “We got to be gettin our ass to China, man. It be bad here, but China make it good.”

“Yeah, Jerr man, and how the fuck we suppose to get to China? Two poor ass white boys without shit in they pockets. Gettin our ass to China, that gonna be one lo-hong hike.” I see the red lights flashin down around the corner, so we start off back to Riverside where the lights dont work. “One lo-hong hike.”

Jerr stick he hands in he pockets. “I dont want no dam dam hike. What we got to get us is someone who buy us a plane tick.”

I know what he be talkin about. I know what he got in he head. “Man, I dont do no shit like that,” I say to he. “You talkin about goin with some rich Chinee guy, huh? No man, no Jerr, not me.”

Jerr, he dont even look at me.

I stay cool, I change the talk. “I hear they givin out food downtown for work puttin up the dikes.”

He laugh, but nastee. “Yeah, givin out food for haulin sandbags, and you bust you ass and you work till you fall down, and then they be comin around with a cup and a pot o powdered soup or some nastee stew with dog food in it.”

This make me laugh, cause there dont be much dog food around, cause there dont be too many dogs left. Just the packs that run late nights. They come up out o the big park, the dogs that dont die when people dump them out. The cops they shoot them dogs and just throw the bodies in the garbage, but the people, they kill them sometimes and when they kill them, they eat them. Pretty good meat on a dog, if you can catch it. “There be days I wish I could get me and my mommee some good dog food.”

“Me, I guess I got me other ways to get some decent food.” Jerr stand up and pull back he shoulders. “Gettin a blow job be better than bustin my ass in some construction site, gettin bricks droppin on my head, or cranes fallin on top o me.” I hear there was a crane fall down the other day, it kill a bunch o dike workers who get theyselves caught under it. “I guess I can take a old Chinee man on top o me stead o a crane, I guess.” He look at me like he be wantin to fight.

I dont look in he eye. I dont want to think o any old rich Chinee man bein on top o me. “Man,” I say, real soft, so he dont think I be startin anythin, “man, there got to be some better way to get along.”

“Dont be nothin. Dont be nothin.”

“Fuckin Chinee.”

“Dont be their dam dam fault. Just stuff happen, and they take advantage o it. They be on the ball, Tom man. They keep they eyes open. They see the chance,

they come on in. Our daddees they just sit around thinkin everythin got to be the way it always be, and when it stop bein that way, they lose out. They always thinkin they so smart, they got nothin to worry about. Then all the money go away and they dont know what they asses should be doin, and they sit and go 'Boo-hoo, boo-hoo, why the world not be the way it suppose to be, keepin us good whiteys all rich and happy?' Now, I got my eyes open. All the doors, they be shut. All the roads, they be blocked. I got one thing somebody might want to pay me for, and that be my butt. The only ones got the money to pay for anythin be the Chinee. So then."

This kind o talk make me want to throw up my guts. Then I figure he tellin me somethin without sayin it. "Shit, Jerr man," I say, "you already done it, didnt you?"

He really dont look at me then. He walk around, he look up at the windows like he expect somebody to yell out for he. Oh dont the windows look interestin?

"How you ever do it?" I dont really want to know, but I cant help but ask. "How you ever hook up with any rich Chinee man?"

Jerr, he shrug and keep walkin ahead from me. "I go downtown to them dikes last week, lookin to work and get me some dam dam dog-food stew. Like we need another dike in this fuckin town, like the water dont just keep comin and more people drown every time it fuckin rain a little. I hang out there a while. There dont be any work, o course, what the fuck I be thinkin they be any decent work in this fuckin town? But the other guys, the young guys, they stay hangin out. I hang out with them guys, and around about the time those rich

workin folks downtown be takin they breaks, there be a bunch of Chinee guys come walkin around where we be hangin. And the young guys they start talkin up the Chinee guys. And once in a while one of the guys go off with a Chinee guy. So I figure it out. I go downtown again the next day, and I check for the real work, but there still dont be none, so I hang out with the young guys, some o them the same guys, some new guys. And when the Chinee start comin over I let one talk me up. And he take me off to this place where they got rooms you can rent for just a hour or two."

"Shit, man." I want he to stop.

"You want to know what he do to me?"

"No, shit, man! I dont want to know nothin."

"He blow me, man." He say it twice, makin sure I hear it. "He blow me, then he give me a fifty. He do it real nice, and then he give me money. And I go out after and I get me and my sister and she kid some fuckin food, man. So that be where the dam dam money be, Tom man. You get a nice blow job, you get a fifty, you get youself and you mommee somethin decent to eat. So I dont want you fuckin lookin at me like I be somethin you kick on the dam dam street to make some fuckin noise!"

"I dont say nothin, Jerr man."

"Fuckin right you dont say nothin."

And we just stand there, not sayin nothin, for way too long, for way too long, till the cop cars come around again and make us go back down to 96. And I think about what Jerr be doin, and wish I had some fuckin decent food, even some fuckin dog food, anythin but the pot of rice and old beans my mommee got on the stove waitin for me, if the electric dont be

out again. Anythin. But Jerr, he dont say any more about nothin.

CHAPTER 2

Just like I figure, mommee she be sittin there in front o the teevee, all the lights out but the teevee, lookin all blue like she be dead. Anyway, the power be on, maybe I could get me some hot rice and beans.

"Tommee, that you, babee?" She dont get up out o the dam chair.

"Yeah, me." Who else it be? Who else come in the apartment besides me and Missus Hormel from downstairs?

"You find youself any work today, honey? Come in here and talk to me."

I be goin to the kitchen, but I turn back and go in to mommee. "Hey, mommee."

"It make me so glad you be back home," she say. "I dont like you bein out so late, it dont be good, you bein out when it dark and the cops goin around. What you doin out so late, Tommee?"

I sit myself down in the other chair in front o the teevee and turn all blue like her. "Well, I got to do somethin, dont I? I cant be sittin all day and all night in front of the dam dam teevee."

I know right away I shouldnt be sayin that last. Mommee she get all hurt lookin and slump a little lower in she chair. She dont go out at all after dark,

and not much in the daytime. She dont go nowhere but to get us the little bit o food they give out at the lines, and then she hurry back here. She be afraid o bein outside. I dont blame she for that, last time she go out after dark she get herself all beat up. I dont know who do it. I go out lookin for who do it, to beat he up, but I couldnt find out who do it. And why somebody be beatin up a woman for money when everybody know nobody got no money anymore? I dont know. Nobody know. Some people just like beatin people up. I get myself beat up sometimes too, it just happen when you go out sometimes, nobody think much about it. That's still no reason to sit you ass in front o the dam dam teevee till you die.

"I got you some o them good old beans on the stove," she say to me after a while. She not watchin the teevee, not really, I see that. She just have it on for the noise o people talkin.

"Yeah." I get up. "I go get some o those beans." I look down on she head. She hair be gettin real thin on top. "You want some, mommee?"

The top o she head shake a little. "No, Tommee babee, I dont feel hungry. Me koi—thank you, babee."

So then I get me some o that crap we be eatin all the time now. It be gettin so I dont want to see no dam dam beans anymore, or I want to at least get me some real cheese to go on them. But I eat it up. What else you do?

After that I go back in with my mommee, and we watch the teevee. Then I start to say more stupid stuff, cause I cant help it, the teevee show everythin so bad. On the teevee there be this story about how the president be tryin to arrange a treaty or somethin with

China to ship us in some grain cause people be starvin down in Georgia and Alabama. Everythin all screwed up since the Tokyo quake and the weather all fucked up, so nothin grow right down there and they got no food to eat. China try to say they got starvin people too, like everybody dont know that be a lie, it got to be a lie. They got everythin fine over there, they dont have no troubles after the quake like we do over in California, with the big wave hittin and all the Japanee companees goin broke and firin everybody, pullin out o America and nobody havin no jobs anymore. China dont have those troubles, so they got no reason not to ship us some o they leftover food. Mommee, she tell me we use to ship them plenty o our food, back in the old days when we had it all. And then another story come on talkin about the cops killin another dozen guys downtown cause they be protestin somethin or other, but hey, got to have security, cant have folks sayin bad stuff about nothin, that be "posin a threat to our security," or "to our way o livin." Yeah right. Oh man, I just get so fired up I almost got to do some beatin up myself cause I just be so dam dam sick o how everybody sit there watchin all this crap and nobody dont do nothin about it. Oh man, I can see myself gettin up on the news and yellin and tellin everybody what they ought to do: get up and grab hold o somethin and say "Enough! We want some dam dam decent food and we want it now!" But what really happen if I do any beatin or yellin is me gettin on the dam dam teevee all right, but just in a picture o those cops beatin on me and settin me on fire like they do to those protestors, knockin me down on my fuckin head and pourin on the kerosene and droppin lit matches on

me to get me to burn. I be so mad and shit, thinkin o myself burnin with a bunch o dam dam cops jokin over me, that I punch the chair arm and my mommee, she look up at me all scared. "What the matter with you, babee?"

"Nothin." The world the matter with me, that what be the matter, old woman.

"Dont get like that, Tommee," she say at me. "You daddee he use to be always gettin mad and punchin the chair or punchin the wall or punchin me. You dont want to get mad like that, Tommee. It dont do you no good and it make you crazy, then you dont know what you doin. I dont understand why everybody be so mad all the time. All the time I see on the news where some guy just blow up and hurt somebody or jump off a bridge or do somethin else stupid, and I dont see how they get mad enough to do it. I know things could be better, but it still be a lot better now than it use to be."

That piss me off so much more I want to do like my daddee and punch a hole in the wall by the floor. But she on it now, she runnin through she talk about the old days and how it be better now, now when you cant hardly walk up a street without a dozen cops crackin you head.

"We got food now, dont we? They give us food when we dont got the money to buy it ourselves. It may not be the best food, it may not be like we use to have when I was growin up, but it be better than nothin and at least we dont be hungry. Oh, yeah, babee, you sit there sayin how bad you got it," and me not sayin nothin! She not even lookin at me to see if I be talkin! She just be lookin at the teevee and not even lookin at me, like she not even talkin to me, just talkin

to be talkin. "You dont know what it be like back when the money go away and the work go away and everybody wonder how they goin to get any kind o food at all, and I hear they was times some o them even went out huntin rats to eat. Oh dear god, it be so bad. But how could you go around feelin sorry for youself when you see on the teevee how them poor Japanee sufferin over there? Tokyo wiped out and nothin left but rubble, and Yokohama wiped out and nothin left but smoke, two million dead over there and ten million hurt or sick and nothin to feed all the rest o them. Oh my god, the pictures they show on the teevee!

"You just be a babee then, Tommee, you dont know what that kind o thing do to you, seein it on the teevee day after day. I see one picture where a woman got all she babees layin on the ground in a row, all o them dead. Five little kids all in a row dead, and she tryin to keep the cops away cause the cops want to take them out and burn them cause o the diseases. But she cant let them take the babees, she got a knife and she wavin it at the cops. And finally the cops they shoot she dead, and she fall down right beside all she little dead babees."

"Then all the money disappear over here and the jobs start goin, and we dont have nothin to eat, not anythin, Tommee babe, not like now when they give us food if we dont have our own money. There be days I dont know how we goin to stay alive till the next mornin. We be so hungry, but we be well off next to some folks. The rich folks downtown, they already be out o here cause the water come up and flood the big buildins, but how could the rest o us go anywhere? We

dont got any money to get out with or any place to go if we do get out. Other places be just as bad, anyway, might just as well stay here in our own home.

"Finally, sure enough, they start to get things put together again. They get the cops together and drive out the gangs that come in, and they bring in food and set up the lines so a person can get somethin to eat if they dont have no money. I dont know why he get so mad, but you daddee he hate the cops so much he say he cant stand it and he go away. But how I go anywhere else? I dont know anybody anywhere else, I grow up right here in this apartment. My own daddee buy it way back when times be real good and that be the smartest thing he ever do, it give us a good home all these years even when a lot o friends o mine get pushed out on the streets cause they dont have money for they rent. But we own this home and we ought to stay and keep it. You daddee he dont see it like that, he dont be from the city, he be from Illinois and he say, 'Why we stay here and starve to death like the dogs in the street or get our heads bashed in by the dam dam cops?' He just dont understand how it be with me, he just never would understand. So off he go, off he go and leave you and me here. But I dont blame he for it, I dont hold anythin against anybody. We all got to do what we got to do. We all be like god make us and that how we got to stay. That how we got to stay."

She be quiet for a while and I think she finally go to sleep, but then she start noddin she head and sayin quiet to herself, "We got it pretty good now, better than most people. Better than them poor Japanee, them poor buried babees, them poor little girls runnin down the streets with they nightgowns on fire. We got it

pretty good now. I just dont understand how people get so mad all the time. I just dont understand."

Then the lights go out. Another fuckin blackout. The teevee go dead. But mommee she just sit there noddin she head. "I just dont understand. I just dont understand." Over and over again. My mommee be crazy. And I know if I keep on sittin there in the dark with she I go crazy too. Then the lights come up again and the teevee come back on with a big smack and the picture come on showin more news where some politician gettin hisself shot by another guy in front o the city hall down on 12 by the water where they be buildin the new dikes.

I go in my little room and start my music playin. My favorite disc now be one I copy a year ago from my man Jerr that he download from he computer when it use to be workin, Ying Chu's first disc. The songs Chu my man sing make me feel good and easy with myself. None o that fast nastee music with the horns and the screamin women and the drum machines kickin so fast it make you blood pound and you head ache, like they put on outside on the street to dance to in the middle of the day, the women jumpin up and down to get they men hot and the men jumpin around and bangin they fists on the dead cars and smashin they windows in. That be okay sometimes, when we be partyin on club night. But Ying Chu just sing good music. I listen to my man Ying Chu a lot at night. I put on my phones and turn on the music and lay down on my bed and look at the pictures o Chu on my screen while I hear he sing my best song, *Zui hou de yi ci.*

Zui hou de yi ci
Ning yuan wo ku qi.
Shen shen de ai shang ni,
jiu bu hui zai ku qi.[*]

Oh, I wish I know more Chinee! I can read the words on the screen o my player, o course, but I want to know what he singin like I know my own talk. Then I could really be inside the music. Ying Chu be the greatest. He could sing about how he got a pimple, it still sound good. I float on the soft music and the pretty words, my eyes close and the world dont be in my room at all, everythin be soft and floatin and the quiet beat behind it all make my heart slow down. If I had any money I get myself a keyboard and put down songs just as quiet and slow and pretty as Ying Chu do.

But then I see all o a sudden that I dont be thinkin about the song, about the music, but about Ying Chu, and he face, and he brown eyes, and he hair in the braid down the back, he silver shirt and skinny waist, and what Jerr do downtown with the rich Chinee guys. Then I got to turn the music off. I put on Park Ji Joo instead, she be the most beautiful singer in the whole fuckin world and she music be nastee and fast fast fast like sex, like gettin with a woman.

[*] For the last time
I would rather cry.
This is not an easy matter.
I will not cry again.

CHAPTER 3

My mommee and me we be goin down to the food lines on Columbus Circle. She dont go by herself cause it make she scared to and I got to go with she anyway cause they dont give you the stuff for two people unless you can prove you got somebody else by they papers. One o our neighbors she get in trouble cause she daddee he dont be able to get out o bed anymore, so she be in line by herself, tryin to get what two people suppose to get. But she don't have she daddee he medical papers with she and they wont give she what she got rightfully comin to her. She start yellin and the cops they come and take she away. She be gone two days before they let she out to go home, and she daddee he almost die cause nobody know she dont be home to take care o he. He almost starve to death. You cant talk to these cops, they dont take no shit off nobody. It just be easier if I go with mommee to get our food.

It be a long walk down to Columbus Circle from 105, so my mommee she want to take the bus, but the busses be so crowded with old people that I dont like to get on them. And they stamp you on the hand when you first get on so you only get three more rides that day. You got to plan real careful that you do everythin

you need before you use you last ride, or you cant get home.

But mommee say she cant walk so far, so we get ourselves down to Central Park West to wait for the bus. We got to let two three go by cause they be so full you cant get youself on, and another couple just go by cause they full and the driver dont stop for no more people, even if somebody on the bus want to get off. Cause when the bus be so full, the drivers dont got to stop till they get to a main stop, and if you want to get off somewhere else, you just be out o luck. So we wait and wait and finally we get on a bus and we start downtown. I could've walked it by then, been down to Columbus Circle and back already, but my mommee she cant do it.

The busses be so slow cause all the streets be tore up. They always talk like they be doin all this construction, gettin the city built back up again, but all they be doin is tearin stuff up and leavin it that way forever. And where the water come up from the river they put up dikes, and everythin on the other side o them dikes end up under the water and goodbye. The bus got to go around this way and that way if the street got too big holes in it, so it take us almost a whole hour just to get down to Columbus Circle to the lines. But my mommee, she stare out the window the whole time happy as can be, lookin at the big dirty buildins and smilin.

"See there?" she say like always, pointin at the old museum when we go by. "You use to love goin in that museum. You use to love goin to see the dinosaurs and the big old whale that hang from the ceilin. You remember how much you like to do that? I remember

once when you be just a little boy I take you in there and you see the stuffed elephants and you start screamin and screamin." She laugh at that, like she dont tell that story about me every time we go by the museum.

"Yes, mommee." She tell me this same story so many times it be like I do remember it myself. When she use to go out by herself I bet she probly tell whoever sit next to she on the bus the same story, like anybody care but her.

We finally get close to Columbus Circle, about two three blocks away, and I could see the lines already. Oh shit, the lines be so long and everybody be standin there so quiet. That be what get to me all the time, everybody standin so quiet, like they be zombies or somethin. But they just scared, and careful. Once in a while somebody on the lines have enough o everythin and get mad enough to start hollerin and just lose it, and then the cops run up and drag them off. The cops always run up right off, even if the hollerin person be with somebody who could get them quiet again. The cops they just love bustin heads. No matter how many people standin in line, there always be more cops than people. And the cops, they sure get they food all right, they get they food before any o the rest o us. They be fat and round with they black helmets and black visors and blue shirts and they sticks and guns.

There be a big fight, back when they start the food lines, about puttin one at Columbus Circle cause so many rich people live and work there. But most o the rich people they move out so dam dam fast when the water come up that the fight just go away. There still be a lot o workin people in Columbus Circle cause so

many buildins get flooded downtown and so the offices move up here, but those people try to keep away from us in the food lines. They probly be afraid we be goin crazy and attackin or shootin them or something. Like anybody got any guns since the cops took them all.

By the time we get off the bus it already be almost noon and the food lines stretch on forever. The workin people be comin out o the Coliseum and the big mirror buildin for they lunches. "Come on mommee," I say to she, and she climb down real careful, not in case she might fall or anythin, but just because she so scared bein outside on the street. I get us over in the first line we come to. All the other folks comin off the bus make real fast for whatever line they think goin to move faster than the others. There use to be food lines up closer to where we live, on 86, but when there start bein not so much gas for the trucks, they put all the West Side ones together at Columbus Circle. Then half the city got to go to one place to get they food. Real smart.

"I hope they get in some spinach or greens," my mommee say. "Wouldnt you like somethin green, Tommee? Or maybe peanut butter. Peanut butter be good. If I could get some flour I could maybe make us some peanut butter cookies now that the power look like it be stayin on pretty good. I think Karen got some flour and if she dont use it up yet I could make us all some peanut butter cookies. Wouldnt you like that, Tommee? The Hamlins like that too, I think."

"Why dont you just wait and see first if they got peanut butter, before you start bakin cookies for the whole dam dam buildin?"

She laugh at that. The old woman standin in front o us with a canvas bag hangin on she arm, she turn around and talk to my mommee. "I dont hear nothin about there bein peanut butter today," she say. "But I hear they got in a lot o fresh red apples in."

"Oh, I like red apples," mommee say to she.

"I dont have a good apple in so long," the old woman say. "The last time we get apples, they be all mealy and mushy and dont have no flavor at all. It dont even be worth eatin apples like that."

"I know, I know," mommee say to she. "I think we ought to be tryin to grow some apple trees our own selves. If they would let us into all them vacant lots, we could plant some seeds and grow us some food. There be so many vacant lots all over, we could really get ourselves some nice trees growin. Nothin I like better than a fresh apple. And it be nice to get some green growin in this old city again."

The old woman stop smilin when my mommee say they should be lettin us into them vacant lots. She turn around again real fast, in case any o them cops hear my mommee and think she be talkin out against how things are. I understand why the old lady do it, but it make me mad, and mommee, she dont get it at all. I know she think the old woman just be snooty. But anyway she shut up and we just stand there, movin up a step every once in a while, standin there and standin there.

At least they be makin it so not everybody come for food all at once every day. They make it so people with different names come different days. If you name start with a A or B or C, you come on Mondays, and if you name start with a W or Y or Z, then you come on

Saturdays. Like that. It dont matter what day you come as far as what you get for food. Trucks come in every day with different stuff. It just depend on when they stuff come in. If you name start with a M like ours and you comin on Thursday, and they get in a hundred cases o peanut butter on Thursday, then you get some peanut butter. But if you name start with a Z and you comin on Saturday, then all that peanut butter it probly be gone by then, and you get whatever come in on Friday or Saturday, and we wont get whatever that be when we come back on Thursday. And it dont matter if you like peanut butter or not—what they give out is what you get, and you better learn to like it or you go hungry.

The workin people com out o the big buildins for they lunches, and I see them look at us. I dont get mad at them for workin and havin lunches. I be glad somebody get anythin to work at. Some o my buddies, they get so mad when they see a workin man, they want to hurt he, but I dont feel that way. I say if you got you some work, good for you. If more o us people could be gettin work, the food lines they be shorter for everybody else.

O course I dont be lookin much at the workin people. It always better not to look at people. Somebody be gettin mad at you if you look at them and they think you lookin the wrong way, or too long, or whatever. I dont get like that when people look at me, unless I know the people be lookin at me doin it just to make me mad. Then I let them get me mad and we start fightin. But you got to look somewhere, right?

My mommee she be talkin to me again about some stupid stuff, just talkin to be talkin, so I look around

careful, and then I see over across the street a couple young guy like me standin around at the bottom o the statue, hangin away from where the cops be standin. And I check just to find out if maybe I know any o them guys. But I dont know them, they dont be guys from my street than my street. Then I see another guy go up to them, a workin guy. I know he work cause he got on a suit and tie like the people who work in the offices wear. He go up and start in talkin to one of the young guys.

I start to feel kind o sick to my stomach. Then I see them two, the workin guy and the young guy, walk off together towards the park, the workin guy in he suit and he tie lookin around careful till they hurry through the gate in under the trees.

I be comin down to these old food lines with mommee once a week since forever and I always look around like anybody do, but I never see before no young guys hangin out by the statue and workin guys comin over and talkin to them. Now I see it and I get real mad with my own self. I know what they be doin and I only see it now cause o what Jerr tell me.

Maybe those two guys go off just to shoot dice, or talk, or smoke somethin. Maybe they be old friends. Maybe they be brothers. But oh I dont think so. I think I know what they be doin really. Dam dam Jerr for makin me think like that!

And mommee talkin and us movin up just a step, another step, and she wonderin what we get us to eat tonight. She sure would like to get us some apples or some peanut butter, or maybe somethin green.

CHAPTER 4

I be walkin down 96 to Riverside where the park use to be before the water come up. I be walkin with my man Mark, we be goin to where the lights dont work so we can hang a while without the cops botherin us. The cops be makin sweeps up the avenues at night durin the last week, pickin up anybody they see walkin. Two guys I know, José and Robert, get the cops pickin them up just last night. It throw a scare into everybody. That be what the cops want, everybody afraid. Then all they got to do is show up and everybody say, "Okay, whatever you want man, dont hurt me." Them cops in they blue shirts and they black helmets and they big guns. My man Mark tell me, "There be a big crowd up in the Bronx yesterday makin trouble cause the food lines up there dont have nothin, not nothin man, and all them people hungry and they get more and more scared. And the cops they just run they big trucks right into the people. They run over a whole bunch o people, people get theyselves *killed*, Tommee man, and the cops they just drive they big trucks right into them and jump out and start shootin they rubber bullets. At people they already run over!"

"Yeah man, I hear that on the news this mornin. Them fuckin cops be crazy, Mark man."

"They be crazy and they dont care what they be doin or who they hurt. They run over old women up there, man!" Mark he throw a punch at the air there by the sloppy water hittin the bottom o the board fence they put up to keep us away from the river. "Fuckin cops."

We hear a siren over on Broadway somewhere. We hear sirens all the time now.

We see some guys up the street there in the dark and they be guys we know, Jimmee and Dan and Bo and Chris. We say nee how and go over with them. Chris, he be part Japanee, he grampa be half Japanee and he mommee be tryin to move to China. So many Japanee move to China after the big quake that Japanee get to go to China any time they want. Chris tell me, "My mommee she have enough o this, man, we be sick and tired o watchin everybody hungry and needin stuff and always worryin if the cops gonna come and bust in you head." Chris, he daddee got a sort o job, he work two days a week cookin soyburgers at a lunch stand down by where they puttin up the new dike. He get the job cause a Japanee run the site and he give he buddies work when he can. Chris get to work down there once in a while too, if somebody else be gone, but he dont get to work much. But he family, they got a little money and so they dont have to stand on the food lines all the time like us.

"I be gettin mad at you, if you dont watch out," Mark say to he. "You mommee dont go to the dam dam food lines like my mommee. But hey, man, you get you a chance to go to China, you take it."

"And I be hidin in you suitcase!" Dan say.

Chris shake he head. "We try, but it dont be so easy like you think. Them Chinee dont just say, 'Hey, you got the eyes, come on in.' You got to fill out forms and do interviews and get to this office and that office. And you think them feds want us all runnin off to China? Shit no. My mommee be workin this for two month now and we not be any closer to gettin on the plane."

We shift spots to hang. You dont want to stand in one spot too long, cause the cops they come lookin regular there on the dark streets by the water. The buildins on the street by the water all be empty cause everybody move out when the water come up, everybody think they goin to get floods in they livin rooms. We bust into some o the basements sometimes just to have a quiet place where the cops wont see us, and sometimes the basements do got water in them. We dont go in the basements anyway cause they stink so bad and there be rats down there, specially in the winter. I hear they plan on knockin down all those buildins by the water so people like us cant get in them. They call it another security risk. Everythin be a dam dam security risk these days, even a bunch o old empty buildins. I hear one man on teevee say the water be wreckin the buildins, rottin they foundations, so they could fall down and people could get theyselves hurt. One good thing, since the cops be scared o the buildins fallin down on they heads even more than us, they dont come around here so much, botherin us when we dont be doin nothin.

Dan say while we walk to a new spot to hang, "You hear José get pick up in a sweep yesterday."

I say to he, "Yeah, he and Robert both, they pick them up."

Jimmee spit through the fence at the water. "This be bad, man. What José and Robert ever do to anybody?"

"Robert, he workin a job three day a week," Bo say. "I dont think they pick up people with jobs."

Jimmee spit again. "Man, they dont stop to ask you if you got a job when they make they sweeps. They just pull out they guns and push you in the trucks. What I want to know is where they take you when they pick you up? We dont hear from anybody who get pick up. Where these people goin? What the cops doin to them? That what I want to know."

"Oh, they got to let them go," Dan say to he. "What you think they doin, dumpin all o them people in the ocean?" And he laugh.

"I think like Dan say," I say. "They probly just keep them people in jail while they checkin them out, then they send them home."

"Yeah," Chris say, "they just hold them people in jail. They only be makin the sweeps for a few days, then they give it up like everythin else they do."

"Up here they only be makin sweeps a few days," Jimmee say. "They be doin sweeps downtown for a couple *weeks* already, and none o those people show up again. That what I hear."

There dont be much I can think to say to that. "But then what they do with them? They cant keep all them people in jail such a lo-hong time."

"Maybe they dont keep them in jail."

Nobody talk when Jimmee say that.

"Lets move on," Dan say. "Cops be comin along if we dont move on."

Sirens scream over by Broadway, like always. “Cops be busy over there,” Chris say.

Dan say, “Lets move on anyway. I dont want to just stand.”

So we move on, and I look down there at the water. It sink back down some the last couple years, there be a big mud slick under the fence where the water use to be higher. Lots o rats run around down there in the mud, and in one place there be a lot of ducks hangin, and them other ugly-lookin birds with the long necks, you see them a lot way out in the water with just they heads stickin up out o the water, I dont know what they call them. They be sittin up on a rock by the ducks, two o them, snaky heads goin in and out while they clean theyselves from bein in the water all day. I wonder what they eat from that water. People dont be suppose to go into the water over there. There use to be guys that fish in the river, specially when the water be so high they just hang over the fence to reach it. They catch theyselves some good fish that way. Then the cops come around tellin everybody they cant be fishin like that, the fish dont be good and you could make youself sick from eatin the fish. I know some guys still fish in the river, they do it at night and they use a fire to get the fish to come up to the top o the water. The fish see the light and they think it be day, and they come up to start eatin but get theyselves caught instead. Fish be pretty stupid, I guess. But most people dont do no fishin. We dont want to get sick if the fish really be bad to eat like they say. We dont get much food at the lines, but at least the food we get, we know it be okay to eat and wont get us sick.

“I dont see Jerr in a couple days,” I say to Jimmee. “You think maybe he get hisself pick?”

Jimmee really laugh when I say that. “Man, Tommee man, you dont hear about Jerr?”

“What?”

“Man, he hang downtown now so much, workin the Chinee, he find hisself a rich guy to take he in.”

Ohman, now I really feel like my brain get shot. “No man, you shittin me.”

“No shit man, he own sister she tell me.”

“He own sister know about this?”

“Tommee man, she dont even care.”

“She don't even care she own brother be sellin he ass downtown to the Chinee?” Dan say to he.

“She say we all do what we got to do. I think she glad she got one less mouth to worry about feedin. And you know what?”

“What?"”

“I think she hope Jerr work this Chinee so he can get to go to China. Cause if he get to go to China . . .” He whistle. “Shit man, if you brother get over to China, it dont take too much to get you own self over there, right?”

Chris start walkin, he cant be standing still. “It dont be so easy gettin into China.”

“Easier you got some rich Chinee wantin you ass.”

“Shit,” Chris say. “You think China want anybody bringin in hungry white boys they got to feed? China got plenty o people o they own to feed. They dont need anybody bringin they fuck boys over.”

“Shit, man,” Jimmee say, “if you got the money you can buy youself two ticks just as easy as one.”

"Cant be usin Chinee men to get youself into China."

Bo say, "I know three guys my own self that take up with Chinee guys, and they go to China."

"How you know they go to China?"

"Well shit, man," Bo say, "they dont be here mp more, do they?"

Chris he dont give in. "You dont get you ass to China fuckin a Chinee man. You got to have the blood, man. That the only way it work."

"Shit. Why else you be fuckin a Chinee?"

Dan keep laughin. "Why? You get youself some decent food and a bed and keep the cops off you ass, that be why! And that sound good enough to me."

This talk really make me feel like shit. "Shit, Dan man, you want to fuck a Chinee?"

He laugh some more. "Well, Tommee, I want to fuck, and I want to eat. If fuckin a Chinee do that for me, why the hell not?"

We be walkin back around the block to Broadway again. I say to them, "Shit man, dont they like fuckin women? Do all Chinee guys like fuckin men?"

Chris he shrug. "No, all them Chinee dont like fuckin men. But some o them do, sure enough." He slap my shoulder. "But they dont take they boys back to China with them. You think they dont got they own boys back in China who say the same thing, say they do it even with a man if he got money? What for they need to take a boy home from America? Dont make sense. Shit."

Dan he say, "Yeah, but them Chinee, they like American boys best. Nice white boys and nice black boys and nice brown boys with hair on they bodies."

They all laugh at that and we back on Broadway now and my stomach twist and twist like I eat somethin bad.

Jimmee change the talk. "Club night tomorrow!"

"Club night!" we all say, "Club night!"

"All o us hook on 98 before the bus," Jimmee say. "Bring you money!"

Dan he laugh. "Got no money!"

"Then bring you own dam self!"

"Club night!" we all say. Then we see a cop truck cruisin up Broadway and we hurry on to our own houses.

CHAPTER 5

Two three times a month they ease off the curfew and let us all go out at night without worryin the cops be throwin our asses in jail. There be some clubs set up in the warehouses down in the 30s and everybody who want to finally get out o they houses get to go and dance and party and see they friends and look everybody over. There be special busses goin all over town takin people down to the clubs. The only bad thing is they make people stay out at the clubs all night, cause the busses dont run again till the next morning, and you cant walk on the streets late at night or the cops pick you up sure for bein drunk, even if you dont drink nothing but soda all night. They dont care, they say if you out on club night you got to be drunk. So we got to stay out all night. The old folks they dont come out too much. Course the cops be all over the clubs, they line up along the streets in front o them, always more dam dam cops than there be regular people in this town. All o them in they helmets and holdin they guns, waitin for somethin to happen, waitin for somebody to do somethin stupid. Somebody always do somethin stupid. What they expect? People only get to party two three times a month, o course somebody start somethin. Then the cops run into the

club and bash everybody in they head and drag in whoever they can catch. Some people think that be part o the fun, bein where the trouble goin on and tryin to not get caught by the cops. Some people be fuckin stupid.

Mommee dont like me goin out on club night. She think somethin bad happen to me sooner or later. "Why you dont just stay home with you mommee? You could have you friends come over here, you could have just as good a time here."

"Mommee, this be a time for me and my friends to get out and have some fun."

She dont even look up from the teevee. "I know, I know, you young people always want to have you some fun. I use to go out all the time when I be young, that be how I meet you daddee. Oh that man could dance!"

"I goin out now, mommee."

"I know, I know." She shake she head. "I just be scared you get in some sort o trouble, even if you dont do nothin wrong. It dont take much these days to get youself in trouble. I dont know what I do if anythin happen to you, Tommee babee. I just dont know."

"Goodnight, mommee." I hurry out the door before she say any more shit.

She call after me, "You watch youself, babe! You be careful!"

The door already be shut but I say real loud, "Yeah, mommee, I be careful!" Then I go out on the street and meet my men where we always meet before the busses come.

There always be a big crowd waitin on the busses on club nights, so many people want to get out and do

some partyin. I meet Jimmee and Dan and Chris, and then Jerr show up and we shoot the shit.

"Jerr man! Nee how!" Jimmee say to he.

"Nee how, man," Jerr say to all o us.

"I dont see you in a lo-hong time, man, where the hell you hangin?"

Dan punch Jerr in the shoulder like he always do. "What the matter, man? You Chinee daddee fly back to the motherland and leave you lonesome?"

Jerr push Dan, but it all be for fun. "Keep you face out o my shit, man."

"I dont want my face in you shit!" Dan yell. "I want to know where you Chinee daddee be. If he tired o you skinny ass, I sell he my own butt for a while!"

"Nobody want you scrawny ass," Jerr say. "Anyway, what make you think I only got one Chinee daddee?"

"Woo Hoo Long Dong!" Jimmee say.

Chris say to Jerr, "So since you got money from you Chinee daddy, you buy us all drinks when we at the club."

"I buy *you* a drink, Chris man," Jerr say, "cause you goin to China and I goin along with you."

Chris he dont think that too funny, but a bunch o women come up by us waitin for the bus too, and we say nee how and shoot the shit with them. I know two o them, Maria who live in my buildin, she be a nice woman about five six years older than me, and this other woman Ralini, she be younger than me and she live in the same building where Jimmee live, so we all know each other. While we talkin we let the first two busses that come up go on without us cause they be so full you cant get youself on them unless you want to

have somebody's butt in you face, but the third bus that come, it got some seats in the back, so all o us pile in and the girls sit with us and on us. That be almost as fun as dancin in the clubs.

Oh that bus ride downtown to the clubs, it be so dam dam slow and we always get stuck somewhere, there be so many holes in the street and so many buildins bein torn down or fallin down. You never know when you be gettin anywhere. There be busses all around us and we all get stuck together in the street. And like always, somebody say, "We dont go nowhere, we just party here!" And everybody in all the busses yell, "Yeah! Bus club, bus club!" Like we dont go through this the same almost every club night. But we all laugh like we never hear it before, and we try and dance in the busses with the people jam up on us and the women sittin on us. It all be part o havin a good time on club night.

When the busses finally cant move anymore, around Times Square, we get ourselves out and start walkin the rest o the way to the clubs. The streets be filled with people, so it take as long to walk as the bus took drivin there.

"What club, what club?" Dan say

Maria she say, "I like the Sheh Sheh,* they play nastee music like I like."

"I dont like nastee music all the time," Ralini say. "It give me a headache after a while. If we go to the Sheh Sheh, I got to say zai jian.**"

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* "Thanks" in Mandarin.

** "Goodbye" in Mandarin.

Dan say, “We could go to the Carpark, there be two clubs in there. Then we could move to the other if we dont like the music in one.”

“Yeah, I like the Carpark,” Ralini say. “They play the nastee music but they dont play it all night, they play sweet music sometimes too so you can dance slow.” She look at me when she say that and I get a kind o tickle in my gut.

“Yeah, okay, we go to the Carpark,” I say, and I look at she too. So we all walk to the Carpark.

Lots o people go to the Carpark, cause it be a big old garage where they be parkin cars when people use to have cars. It got them two clubs in it and you can find lots o places to hang on the other floors and the ramps if you dont want to dance for a while. Every club night somebody do somethin stupid there and the cops come in, two three times a night sometimes, but if you be quick you can find a place where the cops wont find you if you keep quiet. Then the cops go away and the clubs start up the music again. When we get inside my men they go straight up to the bar to get theyselves some drinks, but Ralini she say, “Oh I love this song they be playin! Come dance!” And she say it right to me, so I let my men go and she and me go in to dance.

The song they play be a Chengdu* song, all electric boom boom and whiny electric er-hu wailin over it, good to dance to. She and me dance with hundreds o people around us, bumpin into us and pushin us in on each other, so we end up dancin close together. Ralini smile and smile at me, cause you cant talk when you

* Capital of Sichuan Province, thus the style of music popular there, marked by heavy use of synthesizers and a frantic electronic beat.

dancin, everythin be too loud. But she be smilin, and then the one song stop and change to another one, and then another one, but we just keep dancin. I see Jimmee and Dan and Chris and Jerr dancin with some girls way away from us on the other side o the big concrete room.

Then the song change again, and they play a old Koree song, "Fallin in Love," and Ralini she look at me happy cause it be a sweet song, and we get to dance slow. And I think, yeah man, I see how the night could go for me and she.

I think I'm fallin in love, in love with U
Nuh-doh nah-wah gaht-eun saeng-gahk-ee-
gi-reul
I think I'm fallin in love (fallin in love),
in love with U
Nuh-ae sarang-eul wuhn-hahl bboohn-yah
And I dont even get us a drink yet.
I think I'm fallin in love, in love with U
Nuh-doh nah-wah gaht-eun saeng-gahk-ee-
gi-reul

I like those old Koree songs. I dont know what they mean but they always sound like lovin and the women like it when you dance slow to them.

Mae-eel-bahm nae-gah ggoohm-ggoohl ddae
mah-dah nuhl neu-ggyuh, neu-ggyuh
Nae-gah ggoohm-ggoouh-wahs-duhn nah-ae
sarang-ee ba-roh nuh-rahn-guhl ahl-gae
dwae-uhss-eul ddae

We start kissin and our hands be on each other. Club night.

After this song end we finally go to the bar to get us somethin to drink. I get Ralini a vodka and my own self a beer. We talk a little standin there, not too much cause the music get loud again, but then Maria come up to us and she drag Ralini off to the bathroom to talk. Dan come up to me and shout in my ear, "You and Ralini be gettin close on the floor."

"Yeah," I shout back to he, "I stick with Ralini tonight."

"Keep you eyes open," Dan say to me, "I see a couple guys over there drinkin and lookin at Ralini while you standin here. If they dont pass out early they probly be startin somethin with you."

I nod. "We go to the other club a while," I say. "You want to come up with us?"

"I stay here a while. There be some hot ladies I want to check out. Club night!"

Ralini and Maria come back up to the bar and I tell Ralini maybe we could check out the other club. She say, "Okay, Tommee, we go see what music they playin up there." So we go out and I see Jerr leanin on the wall outside the big door, he be talkin to a couple guys I dont know. He see me come out with Ralini and he smile at me big and give me the thumb. Ralini she be pretty hot.

Outside in the wide dark halls there be lots o people hangin, some bunches o people and some just couples makin out there. I take Ralini over to the elevator and we wait for the big car elevator to come back down from the club upstairs. There be maybe fifty people waitin, so we got to stand around and let the elevator

go once without us before we can get on. Then when we finally get on and the dam dam thing, everybody push on behind us so we get jam back in the corner, it be worse than the bus. I put my hands up on the wall over Ralini and keep my arms tight straight so she dont get push right into the wall. That put our faces real close and we could talk quiet with each other and kiss a little. She tell me about she brother, who be movin out o the city and goin to stay with a friend out in Cleveland where he think he could get a job.

"They got this big project goin on out there," she say to me, "and Suni he know how to do this special computer program they use, so he friend Jonnee he say he can get a job out there. If he get hisself a job, my folks and me we might go out there with he."

"You might be movin out o the city?"

"If there be a job out there for Suni, yeah, we go." She look up at me serious. "We got to do somethin for our own selves, nobody else gonna do nothin for us."

"I never go outside the city in my whole life," I say to she.

Then the elevator jerk and the lights go out and it stop dead.

Everybody groan and a couple women scream. Ralini grab my shirt and I say to she, "Just another blackout."

"I know," she giggle. "I just get scared for a second."

"It be startin up again pretty quick."

"I know."

But it dont start up for a while, and she say to me, "Whew, it gettin hot in this old elevator."

Some woman start to cry up front somewhere. Another guy start cursin about how stupid everythin

be and why dont they get some fuckin electricity that stay on when it suppose to?

Then the lights come back on and the elevator start up again with another jerk.

In the upstairs club they be playin Ming Dynasty, a West Coast band, really hard nastee music, and people be dancin and throwin theyselves into each other and into the walls.

When I be just a lad
I never actin bad
I always do what mommee said
I put the gun up to he head
I pull the little trigger
And then when I get bigger
I hear my mommee say a prayer
And walk to the electric chair

I know the words but I cant even hear them, they play the music so loud it be like a cannon goin boom boom boom against the concrete walls. Ralini screw she face all up cause she really dont like the nastee music. I like it okay, but not all the time. Most young people like nastee music best and they love throwin theyselves around, gettin crazier and crazier till somebody get hurt. Ralini and me hang there in the club only a little while, till the music make our heads hurt. Then we just pick up some chips and stuff to eat and we go back outside the club into the garage and find us a quiet place to sit away from people. We could only hear the music a little bit there, but we could still feel it poundin in the walls and floor way over where we sit. Ralini talk some, and I talk some, and we tell

each other all these stupid little things that dont make no difference to anybody but our own selves, and not really even much to us. Then she get up close to me and we start kissin, real kissin this time, not little nibble kisses like we do downstairs. I get my hands into she clothes and she get she hands into mine. We do that for a good long time.

But before we get in with each other we both pull back and say maybe we should go downstairs and hang with our friends again. That be when Jerr come up lookin for us.

"Nee how," he say to me, grinnin. "We all be lookin for you two, and here you be up here humpin you asses!"

"We dont be humpin."

Ralini look pissed off.

"The cops they raidin the club downstairs, some assholes start a fight. You smart, you got out before."

"Got ourselves trap in the elevator."

"Yeah, all the lights go out and the ice start to melt. The bartenders get all pissed off, like it dont happen all the time, and nobody care anyway, they drink anythin you give them on club night if it be cold or not. So you done humpin or what?"

Ralini get really pissed then. "Jerr, why you dont just go on back and find you a old Chinee man to blow?"

Jerr get real quiet then, and he just turn around and go away hisself.

"That just a stupid thing to say," I say to Ralini. "He just jokin with us."

Ralini stand up from me. "I dont like them kind o jokes." And so I get up too and follow she into the club

again. They still playin nastee music, but she go in. Got to stay till the cops go away downstairs anyway. They play "I'm Tired" by Kyle Heller, he a English singer I dont like so much.

I'm tired, so tired
Never have the energy to get wired
I'm tired. Can you relate?
Dont livin make you feel you in a
semi-conscious state?
I'm tired and I've always been
I'd like to die so I'd never have to open up my
tired eyes again
I was born tired, tired as hell
Tired in my bedroom, tired in my jail cell
Tired when I'm eatin, tired when I sleep
Tired when I'm wadin through the shit
three feet deep
I was born tired, for heaven sake
Even in the womb my mommee's heartbeat
kept me wide awake

So me and Ralini dance even though she dont like that nastee music. Then we go to the bar and Ralini see Maria up here now and they go off again to the bathroom. I just stand there all by myself while they go. I want to buy me another beer, but I be out o money by then, so I just get me some water. Half the people at the bar be bouncin around to the music, one guy be slappin he friend in he face and he friend be slappin he back. People get so crazy on club nights.

There be a couple o old people standin at the bar drinkin. Most old people they dont like nastee music at

all, they like jazz and old hip-hop instead, music where you dont even get any dam dam melody. They mostly dont like the Chinee music we like. My mommee she dont like Chinee music at all. "I dont understand them Chinee words," she always say if I play my music through the speakers instead o in my headphones. "How you know what they be sayin in them songs? They could be sayin 'kill the whiteys' for all you know."

"I know what they be sayin, the words come up right on the screen here while the song play, see?"

"How you know they write it right? I dont like them Chinee songs."

Lots o old people be like that. They dont trust the music. They dont let theyselves get in it and get lost like you got to. These two old people at the bar, though, they be bouncin and smilin and singin along with the melody.

Maria and Ralini be talkin on the other side o the bar, I could sort o see them even though the lights be flashin on and off. I think they maybe talkin about me, cause they look over where I be every little while. I make sure they don't catch me watchin. Another woman be standin next to me at the bar, she be kind o cute, so I look over at she and she finally look over at me. I move close up to she ear so she can hear what I say, and I say to her, "Nee how," and she say back at me, "Nee how."

"Good music."

"Ya ya."

"I dont know that song," I say. "You know who sing it?"

"Dont that be Sallee Teng?"

"You right, it could be Sallee Teng."

I sure hope Ralini see me talkin to this cute woman. It never hurt any to get one woman thinkin you be nice with another woman. But then the cute woman she smile and go off from the bar, so I be by myself again.

I see Jerr by hisself too away around the bar, so I squirm my way over there through all the people. Everybody bouncin to the music and pushin to get at the bar, and somebody hit me in the side, but it just be a accident so I dont start nothin with he. Some people always be lookin for a fight on club night, but I dont like trouble.

I made it around to he. "Nee, Jerr man."

"Nee." He turn away from me.

"Dont be mad at Ralini," I say to he. "She just get mad at what you say and say somethin stupid back at you. She dont mean nothin by it."

"She a cheap little fuck and if you want to be doin it with she, then do it and move on, man."

"Hey, Jerr man," I say back hard, cause this make me mad, "dont get like that. She a nice girl and I like her."

"That be *you* trouble, Tommee."

"Hey!" He start to walk away, but I grab he by the arm and stop he. "What the fuck is comin down with you, man? If I want to get in with Ralini tonight, what you care? Why you be tryin to piss me off?"

He spin back on me, really mad now, he face all red and it not from the flashin lights. "You think I got a problem goin with them Chinee? I got *no* problem makin money any way I can!"

"Hey, Jerr man, I told you I dont like you needin to do it, but you ever hear me or any o us say anythin to you to make you feel bad about it?"

"You all jokin with me and makin fun on me, I can take that," he say. "But I dont want no little bitch lookin down at me for doin what I need to do to keep my family and my own self alive." And he go off mad. I try to go after he, but some people get in my way and by the time I get through them he be gone. Jerr man, he scare me, I think he goin to go off and get hisself in some bad fight, just cause he be mad and it be club night and it be extra easy to get into fights.

Then Ralini come up to me. "Hey there, Tommee." She actin all cute and happy again. "I sorry I get snippy before with you."

I say, "Man, you make Jerr really mad."

"Oh, he get over it. You want to go back downstairs? The police be gone now and this nastee music give me a headache." And she put she hand on my arm.

I say, "Okay, lets go."

CHAPTER 6

Me and my guys we dont see Jerr for a long time after club night. I get in with Ralini that night and we be gettin together regular after. She a real nice girl and we get tight with each other, I spend a lot o time over at she place with she and she folks. It get me out o the house, which be good, and my mommee be okay with that cause I be with some good people stead o hangin in the street where the cops all the time be bustin heads. Ralini she mommee and daddee be nice and she brother, Suni, be a pretty good guy, he go with us sometimes on club nights, but he dont have any woman to get in with and sometimes he act a little funny about me bein with he sister.

Then Suni move hisself out to Cleveland for that computer job and a couple months after Ralini and she family decide they go too. Ralini cry and such when she say zai jian. She say she be callin me, but the phone dont hardly ever work, and most o the time we cant pay the bill and it get cut off anyway. But I tell she I be missin she too and she better be lettin me know how she be doin out there in Cleveland, and if there be work, maybe I could go out there too and bring my mommee. Then they move, and I start hangin with my men again.

But we cant be hangin on Riverside much anymore cause the water it come up even higher and one o them buildins do fall. Big pieces o the roof come down and smash all over the sidewalk, the windows bust and glass go spittin into the water and all over the streets. There be some people livin in that building even though the cops keep tryin to catch them, and I hear one o those people got hisself squashed when the ceilin come down on he. But the others get out okay and nobody know where they go after that. I even hear that somebody move hisself back into that same building even though it all fall down. People be stupid enough to do just about anythin.

There always be people leavin the city, tryin to find things better somewhere else, but there still be too dam dam many people here. My daddee he go off when I be little, and sometimes I wonder where he be. I wonder if things might be better where he be, and if maybe mommee and me could go to be with he there. They say on the news they goin to start in changin the food lines again and we won't be gettin so much, cause Kansas and Nebraska they dont have no rain all summer and the crops dont grow. Europe be havin some sort o famine too cause it rain all the time there and they got floods, so they dont have no extra food to send us like they could before.

Mommee say to me, "Everythin be crazy all the time. It dont rain here at all but it rain so much over in Europe that they get floods. So everybody starve, whether it rain too much or not enough. Tommee baby, I just dont know what we be goin to do. We dont get enough food as it is, and how could we get by on even less? And oh, them poor people over in Europe,

just look at the pictures on teevee, people losin they homes and they animals dyin so they got absolutely nothin to eat at all. At least we still got our home and they still bring in some food we can eat, even if it dont be enough."

"There be food around," I say to she. "The rich people got plenty o food, and the workin people can get enough food. They just dont want to give it to us who cant be workin."

She put she hand on my neck and give it a little rub like she use to when I be little. "Dont be talkin like that, Tommee baby. It just get you mad, and you cant do nothin about it anyway. The world just be all a mess and we got to put up with it till things get better."

But how could things get better? And when? Mister Olson who live upstairs, he tell us one day, "I goin to start a garden up on the roof." He start carryin lumber he find from tore-up buildins up to our roof and he build hisself a couple big boxes up there, and then he go out with some bags at night and he steal gravel and bricks and sand from down where they put up the new dike, and he put all that stuff inside he two boxes. "That be so they drain right, you know?" he tell me. "Got to make sure the stuff I grow dont just sit in a box o mud, or the roots they rot." Then he go out some more at night with he bags and he steal some dirt out o the park, just a couple bags at a time cause it be heavy and he dont want the cops see what he do, cause they probly shoot him for stealin dirt!

He put the dirt in the boxes on top o the gravel and the bricks and sand. He save up some o he food all this time, dry beans and seeds whenever he get some, and he plant it all in them boxes. But before anythin start

growin, somethin happen to the roof under all that dirt and wood, and Missus Barajas get a leak in she ceiling. When the buildin men come to look why, they find Mister Olson's garden boxes and they tear it all up and throw it off the roof into the trash behind the buildin.

Mommee say to he when he tell us, "I dont know why they dont let us try to help our own selves. It be like they *want* us to starve to death. Why shouldnt you be growin some food, if you can figure how to do it without makin leaks in the roof? We could be doin a lot more for our own selves if they just let us try."

"That sure be right," Mister Olson say to she. He be really mad cause besides tearin up he stuff, they make he pay to fix the roof, and he dont have much money to start with. He break he leg three years ago when he work on the first dikes way downtown, and he dont get any real work since. "I just be tryin to keep my family alive," he say, "but they make it harder and harder. It be past high time the people in this country stand up for they own selves and take things into they own hands."

"I hear that," mommee say to he. "But what can people do? The whole world be in a mess. You see how it be on the teevee."

"They sure show us enough what a mess it be," Mister Olson say back. "Cant turn it on without seein something awful that make you want to go hide under you bed. Showin us bad stuff from all over the world so we think it still be better here. But it dont be better here. It be just the same as everywhere else. And who make it this way? *They* do! Then they say they can fix it, but they the same ones that screw it up in the first place! And what we suppose to do? Just sit back and

let them screw it up worse and wait till we all starve to death? I got a wife and baby here to keep alive. I bust my dam dam leg, okay, so they dont let me work anymore on the dikes. But I still be strong and I still get around pretty good. So I try and work out a way to grow us some food, and they tear it all up. Okay, I make a mistake, I dont get it to drain right. I be sorry about Missus Barajas she ceiling. But I got to do somethin! We got to do somethin ourselves, figure out ways to get us some food and fix things up, even without money."

"I dont know," my mommee say. "I just dont know what we suppose to do."

I dont know either, no more than they do. But I know this dont be no place to stay. I got to do somethin to get my mommee and myself out o this dam dam city. Too much bad could happen here. I never be any place else in my whole life, but I know it got to be better someplace else. Cleveland be doin better than New York, there be jobs over there, Suni get hisself a job there, and if there be jobs in Cleveland, there got to be jobs other places too. But it cost money to get out o the city. Somehow I got to get myself some money.

My mommee start to worry cause winter be comin and they still dont convert our buildin over from oil to gas, so we wont have any heat when it get cold. She be boilin up water last winter for us to wash ourselves with, since the boiler get shut down cause we dont get heatin oil, and she still wash the clothes downstairs in the basement with the other women from the buildin, but the water be cold and she always talk about how the clothes just dont come clean like they ought to.

“But what we be doin when the winter come and we still dont have us no heat?” she say to Missus Hormel downstairs.

“I be so afraid, Sara,” Missus Hormel say to her. “Last winter be so bad I almost dont make it through, so awful cold and all that snow. When they dont get the food deliveries in for two weeks I thought that be it, I better make out my will.”

“What you got to will to anybody, Karen?” my mommee say to she, smilin.

“Why, I be goin to leave you that silver salt and pepper shaker set I got. But if you dont want them, I guess I better find somebody who could appreciate them!”

The two o them laugh a minute.

“But seriously, I dont think I can make it through another winter without heat,” Missus Hormel say to mommee. “If the Red Cross hadnt come around and give us all those little heaters, what would be happenin to us? We still got them, sure, but they cant heat up the whole apartment. And what if the power go out? It go out so much lately. What do they expect people to do?”

“They expect us to die, that be what they expect.”

“I expect you right about that. And they dont care if we do.”

“You got that right.”

All the buildins up here still dont be convert over from oil. They talkin about this since before last winter when the oil finally get so high-priced nobody could get any. When the winter come and the Red Cross hand out the space heaters, then there be blackouts all the time, and a lot o old people die from cold. I think

back then that everybody finally could start a revolution, and there do be a few riots around the city. But the cops come and shoot a few people, and everybody else run away, so nothin get done and the buildins up here, where more poorer people live, still dont get convert.

I get home one day from walkin the streets with my men and I find a lot o people standin around outside the front door, talkin law, and there be cops everywhere with they pads writin down what people say. I get a bad feelin like you do whenever you see a cop, and I see Mister Olson, he standin there with some others from the buildin, so I run up and say to he, "What happen, Mister Olson?"

"Oh, Tommee! Jesus, boy, you better get youself upstairs, you mommee need you."

"What happen!"

He put he arm on my shoulder and pull me away from the other people. "They just find Karen Hormel she body inside the park."

I dont understand what he mean. "What you sayin?"

"They find she dead. Right inside the park there at 103 up in the trees by the pond, where those big rocks be. Somebody rape her and stab her."

"Missus Hormel?" I cant figure what he say.

"They just find her a hour ago. Steve just about go crazy when they tell him. They take him to the hospital, he be so bad."

I still dont know what he be sayin. "Missus Hormel be dead?"

"The cops figure it be one o the gangs livin in the park that do it. But they dont find nothin that tell them

who. You better get youself upstairs, you mommee be in pretty bad shape. I be just about to cry my own self."

I run inside the buildin and run right up the stairs to our apartment. The door swingin open, it dont even be locked or closed right. I go in and I could hear the teevee noise in the livin room, and there sit my mommee watchin the teevee.

"Mommee?"

"Oh Tommee," she say real quiet. "Tommee, where you been?"

"Mommee, you okay?"

"Okay?" she say. And she laugh a little laugh. "Oh yes, why I be just fine."

"Mommee, they tell me downstairs about Missus Hormel."

She hands all a sudden come out and grab at me. I step in and let she get a hold on me, and we hug each other and both start to cry then. I cant help myself, I got to cry. Missus Hormel, she take care o me a lot when I be just a little kid, when mommee still be workin. I know she as good as I know my own mommee.

But mommee dont say nothing about it. She just cry. Missus Hormel be she best friend ever, and mommee couldnt say nothin.

We sit there all the rest o the day watchin teevee, till it get dark.

"Mommee," I say, "we got to get us somethin to eat."

"Why?" mommee whisper over and over again. "Why? Why?"

"Mommee."

"What we gonna do? I just cant take any more bad things happenin, Tommee, I just cant." She cry every once in a while, then for a long time she dont make any noise at all. She just sit there starin at the teevee.

I say to her, "Look, just sittin here dont be good. Lets get us somethin to eat."

She dont look up at me.

"You got to get up," I say to she. "Come in the kitchen and we find us somethin to eat."

She still dont move. So I take hold o she shoulders and I pull she up to she feet. She stand there shaky after sittin so long, but I pull she into the kitchen and sit she down at the table and start makin us some soup out o cans.

I dont know how I could take any more bad things happenin either, and this be about the worst I could know. Missus Hormel be a old woman, like mommee. She got nothin, she never hurt nobody, she always nice to everybody and everybody like she. Why anybody want to do this awful thing? I start to think, what the hell we be livin for? What kind o dam dam world do we got? Why we keep goin on, why we keep eatin and pretendin to give a shit, when somebody could do somethin like this? What for?

But I make us the soup and I put it in bowls, and I put the soup down in front o she and she just look at it. Now she start to scare me. I get mad and put she hand on the spoon and I move it so she get some soup in that spoon, and I put it up to she mouth. She sip at it, then swallow. I give she another spoonful, and another. Then she take the spoon herself and try to eat, but she drop it onto the floor. She grab my hand with her hand all sticky from the soup she spill. We sit there

quiet, the teevee goin in the other room so we cant hardly hear it.

I get up and bring another spoon. I dont make she take it, I just get my spoon and eat my own soup. It be cold by then. Finally she start eatin and get most o it down. When she finish I take the bowls to the sink. She start to get up to go back in by the teevee, but I pull she over to the sink and say to she, "Come on, help me wash up the dishes." And I give she a towel and she dry and I wash, and I make sure I take a long time washin the dishes in the cold water.

The next day Mister Hormel come home from the hospital. I tell mommee and say to she, "We goin downstairs to see if he need anythin." But she just sit in front o the teevee.

"Mommee," I say again, "come on, get up, we got to go see if he need somethin. He need us to come talk to he."

She dont move. The news be talkin about the floods in Europe, or who kill who in Africa, or how many buildins get blow up over in Palestine. She wont get up. She be like that for two days. She watch teevee, I make she eat somethin, and she go to bed. Then she get up and do it all again.

Like we all do. We just go on, go on, watchin and forgettin what we just watch, gettin scared and forgettin what scare us. On and on and on. And I think, if this be all, I cant live like this no more. I got to find me somethin, somethin. Somethin. Somethin to make me some money, something to get me and my mommee out o this dam dam city to someplace where people can live without always bein afraid. Somewhere, some way.

That be when I start goin downtown.

BOOK 4

SONG HYU

CHAPTER 1

I was able to indulge my interest in boys only since I have come to work in the United States. At home I did not show in any way that I am homosexual. It is not good to let people know. It would be to lose face, for me and my family. Besides, Chinee boys never interested me. But I was uncomfortable among my friends and colleagues as they began to marry, so when Dia Hing offered me an internship in our Philadelphia office for two years, I come gladly.

Because of my position in the sales department, I also must travel to New York City at least two three times a month on business, and it was there that I first saw the traffic in young men. I cannot explain the excitement that seized me when I first became aware of the young men and women of the unemployed class woh so desperate for money, sell themselves for a few dollars, or a meal. You see, at the age of 27 I had still not had the sex. I could not in my own country, in my position—the son of an important businessman—learn how to find other men who were like me and with whom I could gain experience. But I come to America and here are the young men at the corners, in the parks, eager to give themselves, and seeming as if they all are waiting for me. In a way, I lost my mind a little.

Or at least the part of it that had told me I could never enjoy myself sexually. I suppose this was because I was in a strange country, and further, in a different city within that country from the one in which I lived, worked in, where people knew me well. For the first time in my life I felt free from everything that I had ever be. And the American boys—thin, dangerous, sad and needing so much—are not Chinee either. They do not speak my language. They do not even wish to talk much, or know who I am, what I am. They only want to exchange pleasure for cash.

In Beijing life is much simpler and all is known from the beginning to the end of each day. One rises from his bed knowing what lies before him. I lived there, of course, with my parents. My elder brother, who was twelve years older than I, had worked for Jiang Long Group Corporation, as did my father at that time, before his retirement. My elder brother was in their Yokohama office when the great earthquake struck.

I was only a small child then, and yet I remember perfectly each moment of those dreadful days: the first news reports of the disaster, my parents waiting with great fear for word of my brother's fate, waiting day after day, and their fear turning slowly to despair and then resignation. And during our own painful uncertainty, seeing the world fall apart as the repercussions of the earthquake became manifest. First, the tsunamis that wrecked Hawaii, the Philippines, Guam, so many other islands, and caused great destruction in California, Peru, Costa Rica, Mexico, New Zealand, and northern Australia. Then the sudden decline of the stock markets and the

impoverishment of millions around the world as the Japanee, who had lost almost two millions of lives in the earthquake and the resulting fires, brought home all their money from overseas in an attempt to keep their state alive. This, of course, was hopeless, and resulted in the deeper impoverishment of other countries as Japanee companies closed and their workers were left unemployed.

But our own China experienced so little damage that when the full extent of the ruin became clear, many of the Japanee fled to make their homes with us. Our own industry, which was at that time still controlled much by the state, was almost untouched by the economic troubles the rest of the world had suffered, and so we gave them jobs, we opened our arms to these poor refugees. My own family took in a Japanee woman and her child, we hired her as our ayi and treated her daughter as one of us. I believe this helped my parents feel less keenly the loss of my elder brother.

By the time I finished school, we had settled down very comfortably, our family. My father arranged my comfortable job at Dia Hing. Very comfortably, I breakfasted with my parents each morning, rode the train to my office, did my work and worked late each night, went out with my colleagues to drink and relax before returning home to sleep and rise to do again what I had done before. My employers were happy with me, my parents were pleased with me, my friends liked me. All very comfortable.

Too comfortable. My friends gently began to ask why I do not date women much. My father made quiet remarks about a man's duty to build his own family.

My mother was not so quiet. She introduced me to her friends' daughters, educated, professional women who would make an appropriate wife for a son of our family.

So I came to the United States, and everything changed. I changed. No, I did not change—I became, for the first time, what I truly am.

How different is the truth of a place from what one may study in a school or a book! I thought I could speak fair English before I came to America, but I understood almost nothing that the Americans said. I had studied news reports and television programs and believed I knew how life is lived here, but instead everything is a puzzle. The way they behave, the way they carry themselves, is so different from what I had learned. The smallest, most common everyday actions, which we do not realize make us confident in a familiar place, were nothing like I had seen on the television.

But their society is in such an uncertain state that I think none of them feel confident here either. They have much anger. They are filled with resentment, not just against our Chinee, who are better off than they, but against everyone and everything. I think within all of them is the injured sense that Americans are not supposed to suffer this way! Many of them have such difficult lives. It is indeed a dark time for them. Sometimes I think only the police keep the people from doing damage to themselves and the state. And yet they do not appear capable of doing true harm. The Americans are a broken people. Violence may erupt now and again, fueled by new trouble, or the slow building of sadness and need; but the rage burns itself

out quickly and the people sink back into their plodding lives.

When I first came to Philadelphia, Dia Hing carefully managed everything so that I was not exposed too much to how life is lived by most Americans. We are bussed each day from our homes to our offices, which are in a complex of buildings that contains restaurants, a movie theater, a gym, and other entertainments, so that, with our heavy workloads, we are not encouraged to go out on the streets. There are few residences near our offices downtown, and so one can walk the streets safely, but then, there is little reason to walk in them. It is only on our days off that we need see anything of how most Americans live. The food lines are held in another part of the city where they will not inconvenience us. Those Americans we do see on the streets are employed people like ourselves.

But when I take the train to New York City two three times a month, then I see everything, for in New York City there is so little room to hide the real world. New York City is an island, like Hong Kong, and all things sit atop one another in a jumbled, disorienting heap. At the train stations there are lines of begging people who wait for the travelers as they leave or enter. The beggars put out their hands without shame and call, in a very odd fashion, "Change? Change?" showing no comprehensible emotion in their voices, and no visible expression whether you give them something or pass them by. The police are everywhere, with their large trucks, their concrete barriers to keep people from walking here or there, their large guns and their large dogs which will now and again make

sudden lunges at one who passes too nearly. The food lines are placed in a most prominent place at the entrance to Central Park, where some of the richest citizens live, so that the classes are forced into one another's presence at all times. And as the sea waters have risen over the last several years, the city has shrunk and the people are forced to live even closer to one another.

Many times I have wondered why these people do not simply leave. But I remember the coming of the Japanee refugees following the earthquake, their drawn faces, their small bags and boxes of the few possessions they rescued from their ruined homes. Then I think perhaps it is not so easy for people to leave their homes, however terrible those homes be.

And beside the beggars, the young men and women, who look boldly into one's eyes, but only for a moment. Only for a moment. My confusion, the first time a young man so looked at me! I did not know—how could I have known?—what it meant. Yet something in me did know. This I will never understand.

It took me several visits to New York City to find courage to speak with any of these young men. As so often when speaking to the native men outside my own class, I found it difficult to understand their speech. But there is, I have learned, another language which is unmistakable. This is a language spoken with a turn of the head, a manner of looking, a subtle movement of the hand. It is not a difficult language to learn.

And so, one certain evening after leaving our office in New York City and before I went to the train, I

spent an hour walking along the dikes which they are building in their attempt to save this great city from the water. Always the sight of the dikes they build makes me feel sadness. It is not the sight of the dirty bags of sand or the deep puddles seeping under them, clogged with water-logged rubbish, that gives me sadness. No, I am sad because I see it will not be long before the water swallows this city. And yet perhaps it is this knowledge—that New York City is a dying place—which brings even more excitement to what I do. I could not do such things in China, or even in quiet Philadelphia. Only in New York City, which will sink into the ocean in a few years. And I think that when this city sinks beneath the waters, with it will sink again my sex desires.

I walked along the dikes that night. There were workers there, and, more importantly to me, those who would like to work but are not allowed to. Among these are the young men who stand on street corners until the sun goes down and the police drive them away. I had seen them as I passed through the city, and had seen too that they sometimes went off with men after a few moments' conversation. When I walked the streets that night, my heart beat as it had never beat before. I knew that at last I could be what I always needed to be, but had never had the courage to be. Even then I might not have acted, might not have dared to speak. But a young man approached me and said to me, without a smile, “Nee how.”

He pronounced it badly, but I recognized our greeting. I was naturally surprised, for few in this country speak any language but English or Spanish. But Chinee music is so popular here, and many of the

television shows are now in Mandarin, so that they have adopted some of our language without, perhaps, even being aware of it.

The young man waited for me to speak to him. I managed to say something, I don't remember what, and he said something else, all of it meaningless, all of it only an excuse to be standing near one another. Thus we made our agreement. He caught the beating of my heart and led me, with a half-contemptuous nonchalance that deepened my desire, to a little park some streets away. A dirty little park with a rusted fence and cardboard boxes which the homeless had piled everywhere to make shelters. There for the first time I touched another man for sex, and when it was done he asked me for money, and I gave him money. He told me as we parted where he could usually be found, and that he would like to see me again. I remember the fresh excitement of knowing that this boy would gladly see me again, and even more exciting was that I knew I would not see him again.

He asked me to tell my friends about him. This was my first hint of knowledge that there exists in this city a network of men like me who share this interest. I have met several of these men now. Almost all are Chinee who have left their families behind to work here for a time. Some are older men. Most are married and fathers, some with grown children. When they return to China they will leave these desires behind them in this sinking city. They will not look back. Their desire will vanish when they return to our own land. Perhaps once I return, I too will never again be able to have the sex I need. So, for now, I roam the streets, I survey the boys, I make the appropriate

gesture and receive the appropriate response. It is all most exciting to me.

It was another two trips before I found the courage to again visit the place where the young men were hanging. The boy I had met before was not there. Instead I met a young man with blond hair the color of flax, huge, pale blue eyes, his body as thin as a girl's, his arms long and his hands large and soft. This boy's name was Mel and he led me to a loft in one of the warehouse buildings which become bars and dance clubs on the club nights, when the city government suspends curfew and allows the people to drink and dance. Some of these lofts are evidently known to the young men as safe places to take their customers for sex. When we entered the loft, late afternoon sunlight was just glowing behind the boarded windows. The lights inside were dim. It was hard to see. Mel took me to the bar and there was a bartender, though I believe in New York City it is illegal that bars should sell drinks when it is not a club night. But other men and boys were at the bar with beers in their hands. Mel said to me, “Buy me a beer? What’s your name?”

“My name is Hyu,” I said to him.

“Buy me a beer, Hyu?” He smiled at me when he asked, a true smile, I believe, not the street smile he had given when we first met. He was glad to be off the street and in a safe place where no police would move him along. I bought Mel his beer and asked for a vodka for myself. The bartender did not look at me but only at the money I paid him. He was a large black man, bald, with very broad shoulders and a large stomach, with an air of great strength, which I believe is necessary in such a place, so that no one be tempted to

make trouble and draw the attention of the police. Or do these loft owners pay the police to ignore their quiet daytime business? I had no desire to have trouble made there, and had no intention of making trouble myself.

Mel drank his beer slowly, and while we drank he pressed close against me and kept one hand on me at all times. Then when we were finished he said, "Okay, come on." I started away from the bar, but he rolled his eyes and he said to me, "Well, you got to be givin the man somethin, you know."

I did not know, and said, "What do I have to give him?"

Mel rolled his eyes again, but was very careful to continue to smile at me. "Give him a twenty, Hyu man, then we can go in the back over there and he won't be lookin to make us get out any time soon."

I understood and gave the bartender another twenty dollar bill. Then Mel, with his hand on my arm, pulled me away down to a dark place at the far end of the loft, away from the boarded windows and the dim lights. There were boxes and benches and a few mattresses scattered on the floor, and I saw others there, some simply sitting or lying quietly, making no sound, others moving frantically and making noises of sex.

Mel found an empty mattress and pulled me down on it. He put his hands all over me and began to pull up my shirt, pull down my pants. I caught his wrists, only to keep him from tearing my shirt, but he suddenly looked up at me with his pale blue eyes wide and gleaming like reflections of the moon. In a very small voice he said, "Don't hurt me."

Oh how these words, how his small voice pierced me! I could not explain why, but I leaned down to him and I kissed his mouth. I had never kissed a man in such a way before. With the first boy it was only touching, rubbing, and his mouth on my body. We had not kissed. But this sudden revealing of the fear that lived in him, brought forth by so simple a thing as my holding his wrists, made me long to make his life different, if only for this moment.

He fell against me, into my kiss, his hands were again all over my body, pulling away my clothing. I removed his even more frantically, and we fell to the mattress, where I learned many things I had not learned before.

Then I did not make trips to New York City without meeting the young men.

CHAPTER 2

As the winter approached and the days became short, it would be dark when I began my search for the evening's young man. The coldness of the weather increased the speed of the search, for the young men were chilled and eager to find someone who would buy them a warm bed or corner for the night.

On one evening I was standing near the train station. I wished for a cigarette, but did not want to draw the attention of the police, or of the old homeless men who immediately flock to anyone who smells of tobacco. They beg for a cigarette, even for the half-smoked butts we throw away. Because they are so expensive, cigarettes are a help in finding the young men. This night I was watching two young men who stood shivering in a doorway. They wore the usual ragged jeans and thin, black leather jackets which give no protection from the cold. One of them was yellow haired. I admit to a weakness for those with yellow hair and very pale skin. I had almost decided to go to him when someone spoke to me in Mandarin.

"Please pardon me for intruding on you."

I turned and saw a Chinee businessman, very distinguished looking, perhaps twenty years older than me.

"It is an honor that you should speak to me," I answered.

"Thank you. You should avoid the young blond man," he said. "he has a disease."

I was shocked. Was my searching for a sexual partner so obvious that a stranger on the street noticed? But he smiled and put me at my ease.

"Please pardon my presumption. But I have been with this boy and he is infected with a venereal disease."

"Thank you for warning me," I said to him. "Is it the fatal disease?"

"No, I believe it is syphilis. I could tell immediately when I undressed him that he was infected. I offered to pay for his medical treatment, but he became embarrassed and left me quickly." He sighed. "Sometimes these Americans are very stubborn in their refusal of help."

"Perhaps we should not be speaking of such things here on the street. I notice there are policemen coming this way." The police will not usually bother a Chinee in a suit, but if they overheard our conversation and one of them understood the language, they might have decided to demonstrate their authority.

"You are right," he said. "Would you do me the honor of walking with me a few minutes? It is pleasant to speak our native language, and perhaps I can be of service to you."

"It would be my pleasure."

We left the neighborhood of the Grand Central Station and walked north on Madison. "I hope you will not think I am intruding," my companion said to me. "But when I first came to New York City I was also

helped by a gentleman, a young bank vice president from Changsha, and I feel it my duty to do likewise when I see one of our own in a potentially troublesome situation. My name is Li Kui."

"My name is Song Hyu, Mr. Li."

We bowed to one another in the half-hearted manner with which such things are done in this country.

"Have you visited the streets around the big cathedral on Fifth Avenue?" he asked. "No? I have found it very productive, especially as the weather grows cold. Many of the young men there will go into the cathedral and pretend to pray, just to get out of the wind. And our pursuit is less noticeable, as so many people visit the building during the day."

"I hope I do not impose upon your kindness," I said to him, "but how long have you lived here in the city?"

He smiled and pulled the collar of his overcoat tight about his chin. He was a rather heavy-set man with a broad jaw and very thick fingers. "I have been here two years now this coming December. But I believe I will have to return to Tsingtao sometime in the coming year. My business requires it. Do you know Tsingtao?"

I nodded. I was noticing now several young men who stood under a scaffolding that darkened a length of sidewalk across the street. "Yes, I have visited Tsingtao on several occasions when my father attended corporate meetings there. But that was years ago."

"It will be good to return to my wife and parents, but there are some things I will miss." He smiled at me

with his eyebrows raised. “Ha, here we are. You have seen the cathedral before, of course?”

“No, I am afraid I have not. I do not live in the city. I only come here for business several times a month, and I have little time for sightseeing.”

“I understand. When one’s free time is limited, certain things take precedence. But please, I would be happy to show you the cathedral. It is a lovely building of its type.” We walked up the wide steps past a half dozen or so policemen in black coats buttoned high over their broad bellies. The front doors of the cathedral are very large and were propped open. Young men stood leaning against the walls by the doors.

“Will you come in?” Mr. Li asked me. “I know your time is limited, but it will only take a few moments, And,” he lowered his voice, though I do not suppose anyone around us would have understood Mandarin, “they will still be here when we return.”

We went inside and he guided me quickly about the large cathedral. The pews of the cathedral held many people who kneeled and prayed. There was no service being held at the time, but candles were lit everywhere. “It is not so different than our own temples,” Mr. Li said. “Only they burn candles instead of incense to lift their prayers to heaven. Have you visited our temple on 86 Street?” I had not. “It is very nicely done in the old style. Money wasted, of course, to build it so, since the city will not exist more than another few decades. It is very sad, very sad.”

When we had seen the various beauties of the place he led me back out and around the corner. “This way you may see the young men who tend to congregate

on the side streets, out of the direct view of the police. I know several of these boys, and if you see someone you are attracted to, I may be able to offer you advice."

This was a new and odd sensation, searching for sex in the company of another. Suddenly I felt my desires exposed to the world. I must admit that I worried what he would think of any choice I might make. This must be what young men felt in the ancient days when they were taken by their fathers to a brothel to ensure that they had a safe and enjoyable first sex experience.

Mr. Li was very gracious. "The two young men there by the dumpster, I have known both of them. The frail, dark boy is very sweet and surprisingly strong. The other, with the brown skin, I have known three times. Each time I admit that he impressed me as perhaps dangerous, but he has always behaved pleasantly. I am making you uncomfortable?"

"No, no," I protested politely.

"I shall leave you to your ways, as I see someone I would like to speak to myself," he said tactfully. "The boys always know of places where one can enjoy oneself quietly, but if you are in need, please take this." He handed me his personal card, without his business information. "If you are pleased to make use of my apartment, simply tell my ayi that you are a guest. She will see you are made comfortable. Perhaps I shall see you there, this night or another time?"

"Thank you very much, it would please me greatly." I gave him my business card. He glanced at it, then very graciously took a pen from his inside coat pocket and carefully crossed out the words *Dia Hing* so that they could not be read. We bowed to one another and went our separate ways.

I approached the two young men he had pointed out. The tall, dark-skinned boy did indeed have a look, a stance, which struck me as delightfully dangerous. But a closer view of the small, dark-haired boy revealed to me a vulnerability, a secret fearfulness, that shook me and drew me instantly to him instead.

"Nee how," I said to both of them, with the American pronunciation.

"Nee how," the small one said back to me.

"Nee," the tall boy said.

I looked full in the face of the smaller boy. "It is very cold, isn't it?"

"Ya ya, it be dam dam cold. You look pretty warm in that coat, though, man."

"Yes, it is a good warm coat. That's a nice jacket." This is the sort of word dance one must do in such a situation. "But is it very warm?"

The smaller boy hopped from foot to foot. "It be okay. But I could maybe stand to get out o this dam dam wind."

The tall boy understood the situation and said, "Man, I got to be gettin on with my business! You doin the food lines tomorrow, Jerr man?"

The smaller boy shrugged. "I see you, I dont see you, we see tomorrow man."

"Tomorrow man." The tall boy gave me a very cunning smile. "Get youself some warm, man, it gonna be a lo-hong cold night."

Then he walked away and the boy and I were alone together.

"Should we go someplace warm?" I said to him. "You look as if you were very cold."

“Ya ya, I be pretty cold. This fuckin wind blow like a bitch.”

“I feel cold, too. Where do you go to get yourself warm?”

“Oh I know a couple places. O course, it could be better if we get ourselves somethin hot to eat first.”

“Yes, I am hungry too. Would you like to eat something hot with me? My treat.”

The small boy looked me up and down quickly. “Hey man, that be pretty okay for me. I dont mind gettin somethin hot in me.”

The look we exchanged gave his words another meaning. I could already picture him, my large hands holding down his thin arms; his pale chest, flecked with freckles, shadowed under mine; his head straining upwards to kiss me. I hoped he would kiss me. I wanted to feel his stubbled chin as his mouth moved over my face. I wanted to feel his sharp ribs through the pale skin of his back, feel the rasp of the hair on his legs against my smooth belly. I wanted to see his eyes wide and unfocussed and lost in whatever I would do to him.

He shoved his hands into his pockets, shrugged up his collar to cover his chin, and started away down the street.

He knew a safe place for later. I did not make use of Mr. Li's kind invitation. Not that night.

CHAPTER 3

The trains between Philadelphia and New York City have begun to be a problem. There are frequent, unexplained delays, so that a ride which should take two hours may take four. There have even been times when I was unable to take a train back to Philadelphia in the evening because of bomb threats in the New York station. I have therefore begun a new schedule where, on my trips to New York City, it is understood that I will spend the night in the city and return to Philadelphia the following morning. This has opened many new possibilities. I always take a hotel room, for form's sake, as the company pays for it, but I often actually stay with Mr. Li.

But I do enjoy my train trips two three times a month. The hours spent moving slowly through the gray New Jersey scenery are pleasant times of anticipation or rest, as the case may be. My fellow passengers are also often a pleasant break from the routine. One day, I recall, I was traveling on the 6:05 a.m. train, when a lady from Beijing, who is employed by New Oriental Education Group, took the seat next to mine. I politely offered her the window seat, which she accepted, and we introduced ourselves. Her name

is Ms. Tian. “Do you travel often to New York on business?” I asked in Mandarin.

“No, I do not go on business,” she said to me. “I have family there whom I see quite often.”

“Really!” I had met no one before who was in such a position. “Your family lives in New York City permanently?”

“They are my aunt and uncle and their two children, my cousins. They have been in this country since before the quake.” She sighed. “They naturally have many troubles these days. I visit them as often as I can.”

“But why do they not return to China?”

“They feel a great responsibility towards America,” Ms. Tian said to me. “My uncle came here as a young man with very little money. He worked hard and finally owned three dry cleaning shops. When he was forty years old he passed his examination and became a united State citizen. He met my aunt here, she is a born American and speaks no Chinee language at all. I have urged them many times to move to Beijing, but he insists that he is too old to uproot his life, and that my aunt would not be happy in a strange place where she cannot speak the language. He says that this country gave him his livelihood, his wife, and his children, and therefore he should not abandon it in its time of trouble. I have tried to convince them at least move to Philadelphia, where I live, but he will not. It is so much safer there! Fewer people need the food lines in Philadelphia, and most people are employed at least some of the time. My cousins are not of the same mind as my uncle. They want to leave New York City. In fact, my cousin Greg is planning to emigrate with his

own family to China. My father has said that he will help him find employment if he comes. If all goes well for him after he has moved, he will send for his wife and children."

"He would leave his parents here?"

Ms. Tian shrugged. "What can he do? Shall he stay here with his parents and thus ruin his children's future? His children speak very little Mandarin, but the oldest is not yet ten years old. If he takes them now to China, they will easily adapt. If he stays here . . . What should one do? Of course my uncle is very angry. But we hope that if Greg makes a success in Beijing, this will convince my uncle and aunt to return. Oh, it is very sad."

I shook my head. "I have only been here a short while. I did not know there were many Chinee still living in America voluntarily."

"Oh yes, there are many who were born and raised in America, and they are frightened to leave for a country they do not know, though they are also frightened to stay. A trouble you know is less frightening than the troubles you imagine, yes? But as things are developing here, I do not know what we should do. Philadelphia is much better than New York City, but my uncle is 75 years old, and how can one change an old man's mind? I myself am only to remain here another six months before I must return to Beijing. I help them as I can now, but what will happen to them when I am gone? It is all very sad."

But despite such conversations, my trips to New York City on the train were usually spent in planning my expeditions for the evening. I had begun investigating a different neighborhood on each visit to

see what the various parts of the city had to offer. The young men who frequented St. Patrick's Cathedral often seemed embarrassed by what they were doing. Indeed, they seemed unable to show any pleasure at all. I found this interesting, but it palled quickly.

Those who could be found hanging at the construction sites were of a different sort entirely: rougher, grimier, well muscled, not easily subdued, even in the heat of passion. They often tried to bring a friend along, but I did not trust them and never allowed it.

Those at the food lines on Columbus Circle were always rushing, they offered no personality or emotion, they simply dragged one into the Central Park and hurried through the motions as quickly as possible, and if they could arrange matters so that one had little or no actual physical contact with their bodies, they would do so. I did not visit the food lines more than once.

Mr. Li said to me that he did not often look on the streets anymore for his entertainment. "It is much more convenient to deal with those you know," he said to me. "One will lead you to another, and in this way you do not need to make guesses as to whether those you find will satisfy you. And, too, the risk is less. Sometimes these young men, you understand, are not interested in actually having the sex with us. They are on the streets to lure us away somewhere safe so that they may rob us or hurt us. I have had this experience only once, and you are lucky that you have not known it at all, for these boys can be dangerous, and of course sometimes a simple robbery will end with extreme

hurt, or even death. When it happens, of course, one cannot go to the police.

"Then there are the gangs of young men who take pleasure in beating us Chinee gentlemen. For some reason they feel that we are to blame for their problems, though that is ridiculous. They should be grateful—our businesses are in large part the only reason they are not all starving to death! But reason is not something they are capable of. They know only that they have no money and that we have a lot of it. They know that they live on donated food, while we dine in restaurants, though the shortages touch us, too. I suppose the anger they feel must naturally have an outlet, and they wrongly direct it at us. You do not hear too often yet of such crimes, but if the situation grows worse, the problem will spread. For now they happen only in the worst neighborhoods of the city, in the darkest hours of the night. You must be careful. I understand that you are now enchanted by the pleasures you have discovered, and that part of that enchantment comes from the danger. Yes, I felt this too, when I first began. But be guided by me, Mr. Song. Enchantment dies quickly when you are lying in a hospital bed.

"Therefore I have arranged a small party for your next visit to New York City. I have invited two other businessmen, and several young men I have known, who have been encouraged to bring one or two of their closer friends to introduce to us. This is my gift to you. It is a pleasure to me to please my friends."

I was very grateful for Mr. Li's generosity, and as the date of the engagement approached I found myself growing more and more nervous. On the train ride

that morning I found myself almost sick, even dizzy with the anticipation of the evening. The thought of being in Mr. Li's large apartment, with his two discreet servants, two other cultured gentlemen in high positions with important corporations, and perhaps six, perhaps ten young men whose sole purpose for the evening was my sexual gratification, was intoxicating to me in the strongest way. I imagine this was what the old Arabee pashas felt with their harems.

It was that morning that I met two elderly Chinee gentleman who traveled frequently to New York City in order to hear the opera.

"I did not know the opera still existed in this country," I said.

"Oh yes," one of the gentlemen said to me. "Funding is given to them by our embassy. The company also tours to Boston and Montreal, even to Philadelphia twice a year. But as we are so close we try to visit when a special performance is being given."

"Although with these train delays it is not so close anymore," the second gentleman said.

"Yes, that is very true," said the first gentleman. "We have an amateur company in Philadelphia, they are quite good. But it is better to see a professional troupe in the classics. Tonight the Hon Fung Group is performing *The Drunken Concubine* and scenes from *The Purple Hairpin*, and Fo Hou Ling is singing."

"Fo Hou Ling!" I said to him. "I did not know he was still alive."

"Aha, you are a scholar of the opera?" asked the first gentleman.

"I am afraid not, but I enjoy very much the broadcasts on television. And my father is an

aficionado. I remember hearing many times Fo Hou Ling sing on his recordings. How old is he now?"

"He is 65 years old, and as graceful as ever, I am told. Though he has stopped playing the acrobatic roles, of course," said the second gentleman. "This will certainly be his only visit to America."

"It should not be missed."

"The young do not find the time to keep up our ancient arts, and the old masters are disappearing now," said the first gentleman. "It is good to find one who knows of the great actors."

"It is sad that more do not follow the craft," said the second gentleman. "Perhaps you would honor us by joining us tonight for dinner and the performance?"

I had, of course, other plans. "I am afraid I must decline your kind invitation as I am previously engaged. I am very sorry to miss a performance by Fo Hou Ling. But perhaps another time?"

"Of course, of course. I am sure you will enjoy it on another visit. Please let me give you the information for our opera at home. They perform on most Thursdays and Sundays."

I took the paper on which he had written the information. "I am sure I will. Perhaps we will meet there at another time."

"It would give us great pleasure," the second gentleman said.

"Yes, we shall look for you there," the first gentleman said.

"I shall try my best to attend."

We exchanged names and telephone numbers.

My work in the office continued late into the evening and I was forced to rush to reach Mr. Li's

apartment just before 9:00 in the night. The doorman allowed me in immediately. An elderly black man in a worn red coat with gold braid, he had worked many years in the building and knew Mr. Li well. He was silent and showed no emotion when the young men arrived to ask for Mr. Li. The elevator was out of repair again, and so I climbed the stairs to the six floor. Mr. Li's apartment was at the end of the hall, fronted by a plain oak door without a knocker. I rang the bell and Mr. Li's ayi, Zhi Ran, opened the door almost instantly. She was an elderly lady who spoke no English and never once, in all my visits, looked up into my face. She took my coat and directed me to the living room.

Mr. Li's apartment was furnished in quiet good taste, with a few impressive items of antique furniture and several fine paintings by Europee artists of the preceding century. There were also, in odd corners, a very few ancient Chinee watercolors and, touchingly to me, discreetly hung behind the door in his toilet, a calligraphy on cheap rice paper of our character *fu*, for good luck.

When I entered the living room I found there Mr. Li, two other Chinee businessmen, and seven young Americans, all of different heights, skin colors, hair lengths, but each with the same thin frame, the same nervous hands, the same large, calculating, studiedly uncaring eyes.

"Ha!" Mr. Li rose quickly and came to me. "Mr. Song, I am so glad you have finally arrived," he said in English.

I followed his lead and answered in English. "Please forgive my lateness, Mr. Li. The pressures of work."

"Please, no excuses, we are all businessmen here, we all understand." Mr. Li was dressed formally in a dark suit and vest with a necktie. Then he said in Mandarin, "I am pleased to introduce you. Gentlemen, this is Mr. Song Hyu, a dear colleague of mine from Beijing. Mr. Song, allow me to introduce to you Mr. Feng Hsien-tu and Mr. Wu Xian."

"I am very happy to meet you," I said, also, now, in Mandarin. We all bowed to one another in the manner of those abroad. Mr. Wu was near my own age, Mr. Feng was perhaps somewhat older than Mr. Li, with graying hair and a blotchy complexion. They were also dressed well, Mr. Feng more expensively, as befitted a man of his age and position. We had all obviously arrived directly from our work.

The young men were dressed in worn blue jeans or khaki trousers, and all but one wore still, even inside the home, their thin black leather jackets. The one young man who had no jacket wore instead a bulky sweater that made his thin frame seem even more fragile, more embraceable. "And now please allow me to introduce you to our young guests," Mr. Li said to me, again in English. "This is Jacko," who was brown-haired with very full lips. "This is his friend Coree," who was brown-skinned, black-haired, and had a wisp of beard on his small round chin. "I would like you to meet my young friend Daheed," a handsome, tall black man with enormous hands and his head shaved and shining. "This is Tommee," the sweatered young man, woh alone of the boys, extended his hand to shake mine in the American fashion, but drew it back when he realized no one else had done so. "And his friend Bo," another young black man whose muscular chest

was prominent under his red tee-shirt. This was the tall black man I had seen with Jerr, that first night I had met Mr. Li. "This is Alexander," a young man of Asian looks, but not Chinee or Japanee; I took him for Koree, from the paleness of his skin and the sharp prominence of his cheekbones, which made his face look pleasingly feminine. "And finally," Mr. Li bowed before the last young man and smiled disarmingly. "I am so sorry, I have not captured your name correctly."

"Avi," said the last young man. He was very short, thin as a reed, olive-skinned, thick black hair brushed severely back from his high forehead. He looked so much still a child, he could not have been seventeen years old.

"Avi, of course, and such a handsome name. I shall not misplace it twice. As you see," Mr. Li continued, "we have begun our refreshments, for which I hope you will forgive us."

"Of course, I am embarrassed to have come so late."

"Nonsense, please do sit down, and Berle shall make you a drink. I believe you still enjoy martinis?"

"Thank you so much, I would be pleased."

Mr. Li's valet, Berle, immediately poured a martini into a chilled glass and offered it to me. Berle was a man in his late 60s and, like the doorman, like the ayi, his expression never changed and emotion never showed in his face, at least before us. The presence of Berle and the ayi made me overly conscious of myself, and I hoped that, when the evening developed, the servants would absent themselves.

I had been drinking martinis only since coming to New York. Many of my colleagues drank them in the bars after work and I was obligated to match them in

their drinking. A custom from the Japanee that I am not happy with. I had not particularly cared for them before. A bland drink, I had thought. But Mr. Li's gin was much better than that offered in the bars, and the first sip sent a delicious impression of freed restraint through my body. Mr. Li was chatting with Coree about something, and the two Chinee businessmen were speaking in Mandarin to one another. The other boys sat desultorily, legs asprawl, hands clutched about their glasses. I noticed that most of them were drinking sweetened soda, but Bo held a martini glass—a bit uncertainly, a bit too carefully—and the boy in the sweater, Tommee, held a bottle of beer which was, I hoped, empty or nearly so, for he held it carelessly and it tipped this way and that with every swing of his leg. Mr. Li's carpet is antique Isfahan.

I was happy to find how comfortable I suddenly felt. Here I was in a man's home, surrounded by young men who were there solely for sex, and yet I felt quite at ease. very worldly, in fact, and sophisticated, in the Western way.

Bo gave me a lopsided smile and put his knee close to mine.

"You like this shit too, man?" he said to me.

"Yes. These are very good martinis."

"Ya ya? Ya, I guess so. I dont know shit about martinis, man, all I know is they get me high." He kept smiling at me. "You like gettin high, man? What be you name? Sing?"

"Song is my family name. My given name is Hyu."

"Ya ya? Can I call you Hyu?"

"I would like you to call me Hyu."

"Okay, Hyu. I get me another o these martinis, I be just about ready to be gettin in with you. You think you like some o that?"

I had never had the sex with a black man before. I was curious, and Bo was very handsome, with a dangerous curl to his lip, almost a sneer. I had usually been with boys like Coree or Tommee, smaller boys who could give themselves readily to me, as I am tall, very close to two meters, and I am muscular from using the gym in my office complex. But this Bo was also tall—I could not tell precisely how tall because he was sitting very sloppily on the sofa, but perhaps even taller than me, and I could see, even through the sleeve of his thin jacket, the bulge of his biceps. I wondered what it would be like to be with someone strong, someone who could, perhaps, make me give myself readily to him.

"I think," I said to him, "I think that after another martini I might just like some of that."

Bo laughed and looked around. "Where that old butler be? I think we need some more drinks."

Berle duly appeared with a tray of two glasses. He offered the first to me, and then the other to Bo. Bo raised his glass in my direction, winked at me, and took a very large swallow, then he coughed hard, but tried to stifle his cough. "Man, this stuff be strong! We dont get stuff like this on the lines, man! We be lucky we get some good decent liquor!"

I smiled and sipped my martini. Mr. Feng had turned to Tommee and asked him, "Are you enjoying your beer?"

Tommee said to him softly, shyly, "Ya ya, it be pretty good."

"Would you like another?"

Tommee shrugged, but Berle was already there with another beer.

"I am sorry, sir," Berle said, when Tommee did not immediately take the offered beer. "Would you prefer something else to drink?"

Tommee shrugged, then he said, "Ya, maybe, maybe I want to try one o them martinis." And he glanced up at me, like a child surprised in the act of begging for a cookie.

"Perhaps," I said, "you would like to try a sip of mine first?" I smiled at him. "Just to find if you like it."

Mr. Feng sighed and turned his attention to Jacko. I felt I may have made a small misstep with Mr. Feng, but the damage was done, and Tommee seemed to me an appealing young man.

He lowered his face, but looked up at me. This expression is a favorite of mine, and I felt that perhaps Bo would not be all the adventure I should experience in this evening.

"Ya, I like to try yours."

I held the glass forward. He bent toward it. When his lips touched the edge, I tipped the glass slightly so that he could drink. He looked up into my eyes the entire time.

He swallowed.

"Do you like it?" I asked him.

"Ya," he said to me. He sat back in his seat. "Ya, it be good."

I said to Berle, "Yes, he would like a martini."

"Certainly, sir." Berle took the beer back to the bar and began to mix another pitcher of martinis.

Tommee's eyes were wide. “Woo hoo, man, that be pretty strong.”

“It's gin,” I said.

“Kind o make my head go around, kind o.”

Bo’s knee slid neatly up to mine. “You got to be gettin you head around it,” he said to Tommee, looking all the while at me. “Got to take you drinks like a man, Tommee, got to learn how to handle it if you want to be flyin with the big guys.”

He leaned in close to me. “We be keepin us martini drinkers together tonight, dont you think, Hyu? Or maybe you want to play with the both o us, huh? Maybe Tommee and me we could be comin at you from both sides?”

I was startled by this, and almost perhaps as much from the tone of his voice, the undercurrent of—of what? of threat?—yes, of threat—as by the notion of being with two young men at once. This Bo could perhaps make trouble in some way; but it could perhaps be a very interesting trouble.

“You into that, man?”

What was this party for but the trying of new experiences? I looked about me. The lights had been lowered. Berle was no longer in the room, but a row of bottles was set conveniently along the bar. Mr. Feng was speaking softly to Jacko, his hand on the boy's knee. Mr. Wu was no longer present, and I noticed also that Mr. Li, Avie and Daheed were also absent. Only we and Alexander, the Koree boy, who sat awkwardly by himself, were left on the couches, and I could see, down the darkened hallway, dim lights shining where the bedrooms were located. The living room and the

bedrooms, lighted planets in a dark universe, drawing us into various orbits.

"I might very well be into that," I said to Bo.

He stood up with what, I am sure, was meant to be masculine assurance, but he reeled dizzily from the martinis. "Ya ya, man. Woo."

Tommee giggled. Ah yes, I thought, this will be a young man who must spend time alone with me. But later. For now, Bo's big hands, chilled from the cold glass, were on my shoulder, steadying himself as he stood before me.

"Tommee, man, get youself over here. We got us some fun happenin." Bo looked down at me. "You ever be doin this with a black man before, Song?"

I shook my head.

"You got youself some good fun comin, man."

Tommee's hands slipped onto my chest. They rested there a moment, as if unsure what to do. But then they began to move.

"Ya ya, good fun, man. Come on, man, get youself up here on some black man."

And so I did.

CHAPTER 4

Something surprising and terrible happened to me, which I came to realize slowly over the cold winter months that followed: I became—how do I put this?—I became enamored of the boy Tommee. I was ashamed, but my shame was less than the fierce desire I felt. When I was not in New York City, I caught myself thinking ever of his face, which was, I knew well, not a special face; handsome, but not extraordinarily so. And yet when he cast a certain look in my direction, more handsome could not be. When I was in Philadelphia and I woke in my narrow bed in the middle of the dark night, my pulse leaped uncontrollably, for the thoughts that were in my mind, carried from my dreams into waking, were of him. And those thoughts I was amazed by, for they were of such things as I had never known or wished before.

The memory of the touch of hands, not just any hands, but his hands. Sometimes my skin suddenly tingled and glowed with the memory of his caress. The foolishness of all this made my heart weak, and the defiant joy of it, which my body would not let me forget, made my heart yet weaker.

He said to me that he was twenty-one years old, but like so many Americans who have not eaten well for

most of their lives, he looked much younger. Yet I could not believe he was twenty-one years old. There was to him an air of naïveté, of innocence, yes, even of innocence (in one who had been doing what he had done!), which showed me he was still in many ways a child.

He lived with his mother and was very close to her, but with that mixture of need and disdain, respect and disgust peculiar to Americans. For my parents I feel deep respect and affection, as do most Chinee for their own parents. To feel disdain for parents is for me, and I am sure for other Chinee, impossible. Yet the Americans I met spoke of their parents with amusement or horror, and from their literature I understand this is normal to them, that to feel respect and affection for one's parents is considered to be joking. But Tommee spoke of his mother so often that it was obvious to me that he and she were very close.

How did this happen? How did I come to feel this way about a skinny American boy? During the evening at Mr. Li's I experienced all the boys whom he had invited, singly or together with others. But my eyes were continually drawn to Tommee. When we lay together with the boy Bo, he and I continually drifted into one another's embrace. When he was with one of the other gentlemen and I was occupied with someone else, I caught myself watching him. When he was out of my view I wondered what he was doing, how he was being treated: was Mr. Feng being harsh or gentle? Was Mr. Wu doing with him what I had done? And as the evening progressed I noticed that when I glanced across the room, when I reached for someone, there was Tommee, looking at me, watching for me. At last,

as the new day's sun shone red into Mr. Li's guest room and I lay exhausted with Coree and Alexander and Mr. Li about me, into the room came Tommee, eyes bleary and shadowed, hair disheveled. He stumbled to the bed, crawled over the others, and crept up to my side and into my arms as if he belonged there, as a child would lie in his father's arms.

I shall describe him. His hair was pale brown with strands of yellow in it. His forehead was high, and I wonder what might have been if this boy had been educated. But the New York public schools had long been closed, and the private schools were beyond his family's means. And so all he knew he learned on his own. Yet he knew how to read and write, for I had from him two short notes, badly spelled, in his own dialect, but written neatly; his mother must have taught him. His eyes were large, brown, wide and always questioning, never calculating, never cool in that way most of the street boys had. Even in the midst of lovemaking he looked at me with an expression of wonder, as if he were surprised by something—feeling pleasure with me? His eyes were shadowed with pale purple, which made them look yet larger. His skin was pale and fine and soft, for he had been able to work very little in his life. His muscles were thin but strong beneath his skin. His cheekbones were high, his jaw square and his chin cleft. This is pointless, I am describing badly, the words mean nothing. I can see his face quite clearly, and yet what I write is vague, unimportant, it is all wrong, because I saw him differently than others do: I know the people of New York City, if they saw him at all, saw only a scruffy

street child who could have been arrested, vanished, run over, murdered, without their noticing.

In the days following the evening at Mr. Li's I found I could not remove this boy's face from my mind. During business meetings, when I ate, when I talked with friends. Never before had this happened to me. The other boys I had been with, well, I might now and then remember a feeling, a moment of tenderness or fear, perhaps the fleeting image of a hand, a body, a face. Now all was changed. No, not all.

I gave him money, that is why he was with me. Though I believe, I do believe, there was something more for him as well. He might have come to me even if I gave him nothing. But I gave him money, much money, not only to buy the sex, but so that he might have some nice things, that he might give money to his mother, to make him happy. To make me happy.

Mr. Li lost hope in me. He had never become enamored of a single boy: he thought it a weakness. Of course he was right.

Mr. Li said to me, "Ah, Hyu, please forgive me for saying so, but I am becoming just a little disappointed in you. You do not play as you used to. Now you play only with one boy. Do not forget our history. Remember the fates that have befallen our emperors who made themselves foolish for one lover alone, and be warned."

I laughed. "Yes, Mr. Li, I understand. But it is a very strange thing: I honestly cannot help myself."

"I know," he sighed. "That is precisely the danger. But think of what will happen when you leave America, and this boy. He is certainly with you for a business reason—no, do not be offended, there may

well be some affection, but these boys are businessmen, you must recall—however, what he feels more than a little affection for you?"

I did think of that, of what would happen when I returned to Beijing for good, which would be in August. Tommee asked me many questions about China. His ideas about China were very funny. He dreamed it as a place where everyone is rich, where no one goes hungry, where everyone is treated well and works hard and the police do not take innocent people away, never to be seen again. I told him how China is truly. I did not make it sound like a golden place. I did not want him to think that China is a magic solution to all his problems. I was afraid that he was building a dream for himself that I could not make true.

I did not, of course, see only Tommee on my visits to New York City. I saw Tommee, but sometimes not only him. Sometimes when we wanted more adventure —for we both had enjoyed our evening at Mr. Li's— Tommee brought to me a friend of his, or I introduced him to an acquaintance of mine. And twice I did not see Tommee until late in the evening, after I had been with another young man, or after I had visited with Mr. Li and met his new young men. But even with these other young men, even with several, my thoughts turned, yes, in the midst of the most passionate acts, my thoughts turned again and always to Tommee.

"Where you be livin in Beijing?" he asked me.

"I live in the eastern district with my parents," I told him.

"Oh, with you parents." Then he said nothing for a long while and we lay quietly. "I be livin with my mommee too."

Another time he asked me, "Don't you ever be livin by youself in China? I mean, most o my friends, they live with they people cause who got the money to be movin? But in China you got youself work, so I wonder, don't you think you might live by youself, in you own place, when you get back there?"

"In China a person almost always lives with his parents until he marries. Then he makes a home of his own."

"Oh." he said to me, and he was quiet another while. Then, "So how come you don't get marry? It be because you like gettin in with guys?"

I laughed. "It might be that. But I did not know it then."

He twist his face into a funny expression, brows drawn down and mouth cocked up at one corner. "How you not know you like guys? You get horny, you think about somethin that get you off. That be what you like."

"It's not that easy."

"Bullshit! How it not be easy?"

"Not for me. In China, in our type of family, one doesn't think about such things."

"Huh," he said skeptically. "I think you just don't be payin attention." He shifted the sheet over his knees and sat up higher against the wall. "What you mean, 'you type o family'?"

I sighed. "My father is an important businessman, my mother was also important in her field. And my father was involved with governmental matters."

"So you got money."

"Yes."

"Lots?"

I smiled. I was drowsy now. "Quite a lot, yet."

He frowned. "So you type o family got money. That mean other types o families don't got so much money?"

"Of course. There are many poor people in China, just like anywhere else."

He shook his head. "Man," he said, "I don't think there be any poor people in China."

We lay still for a very long while then, and I began to sleep. Then his quiet voice roused me.

"I still think you got to have somethin wrong with you, if you don't know what turn you on for sex."

I did not answer him then. I drew him to me and kissed him, and we did not fall asleep again for a while.

Another time I came to my hotel room from Mr. Li's. It was early in the evening, for I had found the company not so pleasing. Bo had been there, and spoke to me as if he knew something unpleasant about me. I had the sex with him, briefly, but I left immediately after, despite Mr. Li's disapproving expression. When I entered my hotel room, Tommee was there on the bed, eating a large bag of the potato chips, which I do not like, and watching television, one of the Chinee shows. I came in and sat beside him. He continued to eat, I watched the muscles leap in his lean face as he chewed. I put my hands down his chest inside his shirt. He said to me, "What they sayin there?"

I turned my attention to the television. "She is telling him that she will not give up her career for him."

"Oh I don't get that. I get some o they talk pretty good, but I don't catch that last part. Now what they sayin?"

He ignored my hands, so I moved them lower, to his stomach, where he is particularly sensitive. "Now she says she will go back to the club and sing again, as she did before she met him. He tells her she is not a good singer and she is making a fool of herself."

He laughed. "Ya ya, she be pretty mad, look at her slam that door!"

"Let's turn off the television, hmm?" I said to him.

He finished his chips and tossed the bag on the floor. Suddenly he turned directly to me and said, "I like women, you know."

I looked back at him. I did not understand this statement, or, more precisely, why he made it now.

"I like gettin in with women, you know." He turned his face away from me again.

"Yes?" I said to him. I made myself smile.

"Just so you know."

Then he relaxed into my hands. And I forgot to wonder what he could have meant.

CHAPTER 5

I increased the number of visits I be made to New York City, so that I might see more of Tommee, though there was indeed work to do there. Our lives became a routine. Tommee would come to my hotel room and be waiting for me to arrive, or sometimes I would meet him on the street. One time Tommee pretended he did not know me when I met him on the street. I caught on immediately, we pretended we were strangers having anonymous sex.

I found myself more and more nervous when at home in Philadelphia. I would wake in the night and reach for his warmth beside me, but of course he was not there. I was worried by my strong need for this American boy. The memory of his face was always in my mind: his innocent, wary smile, the cunning smile he sometimes gave as he did something he knew would startle me with pleasure, the wide-eyed look of amazement I would catch on his face when I turned and found him studying.

I decided—reluctantly, but with a perverse self-satisfaction—that perhaps Mr. Li was right, perhaps I should not so give myself up to the pleasure I found in this young man. I took his advice and avoided Tommee for a month. I made excuses not to go to our New York

City office, and when I could not avoid it, I left immediately after work and returned to Philadelphia. I did not roam the streets or attempt to forget him with others.

In Philadelphia I spent more time with my Chinee colleagues, and visited some of their homes. Except for my supervisor, we were all living only temporarily in America, for a year or two years, and then we would return to the Beijing or P'yengyang or Baotou offices in executive positions. I also joined more in the Chinee social life which had grown in America as our companies became more and more important. More normal. There were few Chinee companies in Philadelphia, but there were several bars and discos that the Chinee workers frequented. I even went twice to the amateur opera performances in Philadelphia that had been recommended to me by the two gentlemen on the train, that day when I first met Tommee.

I took with me a woman I worked with, Susan Gong. She had been born in America, but her family fled to Beijing when the troubles came and she had been schooled there. Susan worked in a different department than mine and we met sometimes for lunch. She was not like the other Chinee workers, having been raised by very American parents. She made many jokes, and made no secret that she found me attractive. In fact, our flirting with one another had by this time become something of a comfortable joke. She had little knowledge of the opera.

That first night they performed two acts from *Silang Visits His Mother* and three acts from *The White Snake*. I have always enjoyed *The White Snake* because it is a fairy tale and the White Snake is a character of

much range, now modest, now strong, now amorous, now doing battle with the self-righteous monk who has stolen her husband from her. The famous play of *Silang* does not please me so much, but it is full of noble sentiments, and the actor who played the wife was especially affecting in the scene of condemnation, when she sang to Silang the famous lines

> When I hear your words I am unhappy.
> You married the Iron Mirror Princess.
> Because of you I did not wear flowers
> in my hair.
> Because of you I did not wear
> embroidered shoes.
> I did not eat, I could not drink tea.
> For fifteen years I have not sat down at
> my dressing table to comb my hair.

Susan was bored by the music, and she certainly did not understand all the words, but then, no one can understand all the words sung from the stage. At the break between the acts we ordered tea and she mentioned that she would like to go to one of the clubs in town, "To hear some real music," she said to me. "This is okay, but it's so old-fashioned, and it needs some real drums, not those gong and cymbal things."

I heard my name called, and when I turned I saw the two gentlemen from the train to New York City.

"Oh, Mr. Song, we are so happy to see you here!" they both said to me at once. Their names were Mr. Chen and Mr. Zhou. Mr. Zhou's wife was with him, and they joined us where we sat. I introduced

them to Susan, to whom they bowed graciously in the proper Chinee way.

"You are enjoying the performances?" Mr. Zhou asked me. "*Silang* is such a moving opera, but they never perform the whole of it these days."

"I enjoyed the playing of the wife very much," I said to him.

"Ha, he is a wonderful actor, is he not? He is Zhang Siyan, a great-nephew of the famous Zhang Xuejin. He has always played the *sheng*[*] roles, but on two special occasions I have seen him play the *chou*,[**] and he is very amusing. His breath control is exceptional for a provincial player, and he is expert at the stealing breath."

"'Stealing breath'?" Susan asked.

"Replenishing the lungs while singing, so that you can sustain the line without audibly breathing," Mr. Zhou explained. "A basic technique, one difficult to master."

"You are also enjoying the performance?" Mr. Chen asked Susan.

Susan blinked as she groped to find polite words. "Oh yes," she smiled. "But I am unfamiliar with the opera, so I am afraid I do not appreciate its fine points."

"Ha!" said Mr. Chen. "You must allow me to give you a pocket education in *The White Snake* before the musicians return. You are born in America, yes? I can tell by your speech." As he drew her aside, she looked back to me and rolled her eyes.

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* Dignified male character role.

** Clown role.

Mr. Zhou said, "We will not be seeing much of Susan for the remainder of the evening. You must be careful, Mr. Song, for Mr. Chen is a true ladies' man."

Ms. Zhou laughed. "Yes, he believes himself still a danger to us women. I have known him since we were both very young, and he always thought he was a big success with women."

The musicians returned, and *The White Snake* began immediately with the scene of White Snake's and Blue Snake's coming from heaven and their meeting with the young scholar, who offers them his umbrella as it begins to rain. The company performed this scene with great delicacy and I was moved at its conclusion. But the actor playing the scholar I thought resembled, at least in his rosy-cheeked makeup, my Tommee. This was impossible, of course; how could a Chinee man look in the least like my pale American boy? But in the graceful way he raised his hand at the end of a line, the tilt of his head, I thought I saw something of my Tommee. This disturbed me. So I watched more carefully the actress playing White Snake, for she was quite good.

Ms. Zhou kept up a constant commentary on the progress of Mr. Chen's romance with Susan, who had now obviously decided to humor the old gentleman and so, to his great delight, kept her hand on his arm as he translated for her all that was being sung and pointed out the finer moments in the performance.

The second part given was the scene of the monk's abduction of the scholar from his happy home, but this was not so pleasing to me. The actor who played the monk was unable to portray the inherent dignity of the character, who is not at all likeable but who is, after all,

morally correct; for White Snake is a demon, despite her love for her husband and her longing for mortality. And so the scene struck me as imbalanced. When the monk ordered the poor scholar carried off to his monastery, I found the effect almost ugly.

The final scene given was the great battle of the monk and the water beasts that White Snake calls up from the sea to do battle for her husband. This was chosen to display the acrobatic prowess of the troupe, and is irresistible because of the splendor of the costumes, the power of the acrobatics, and the music, which is mostly percussion and quite exciting. I saw that even Susan enjoyed the battle scene, and Mr. Chen fairly glowed with the pleasure of it. The scene ended with the scholar's triumphant entry from the besieged monastery and his embrace of White Snake, with the comic sister, Blue Snake, posing before them and the water beasts ranged about them in fishy postures. We all applauded happily.

Susan returned to my side and took my arm. “You liked it, then?” I asked her.

She smiled and nodded. “I liked the ballet the best. But it still needs a good beat under it all.”

“Has Mr. Chen asked you to sleep with him yet?”

Susan pretended to be shocked. “He is much too polite a gentleman to behave so coarsely!” She chuckled. “He’s really very nice, and kind of cute. He reminds me of one of my uncles. Besides, it’s nice to be with someone who flirts seriously in the old way.” She raised her eyebrow at me, but I pretended not to notice.

Mr. Chen and Mr. Zhou approached us after chatting with friends. "We would like now," Mr. Chen said, "to take you both to a light supper."

"Will it be possible for you to give us this pleasure?" Mr. Zhou said.

Susan suddenly squeezed my arm hard while she continued to smile at them. I said, "I am so sorry to be unable to accept, but we must both leave very early in the morning on the train to Boston. We have a special meeting there, and so we must return home."

Mr. Chen's smile slipped only a bit. "I am bitterly disappointed that I cannot have the pleasure of continuing our conversation!" he said to Susan.

"I am so sorry," Susan said to him. "But work demands so much of us."

"Of course, of course," Mr. Zhou said. "We will reserve this joy for another time. They are performing one of the Monkey plays in two weeks, you know, the *True and False Sun Wukong*. It has many fighting scenes and is always a great favorite, and the actor playing Monkey is really quite good, for a provincial performer. May we count on seeing you again then?"

Susan and I looked at each other and of course agreed that we would be very happy to see them again then.

"Now, do plan on staying out just a little late that evening," Ms. Zhou said. "I always like a bit of dinner and a few glasses of wine after the performance. It clears my head after all this wailing!"

We laughed and took our leave with many bows. When we came out on the street Susan said to me, "Now, get me to a bar! I need a decent drink and some real music." She took my arm again as our friends

appeared behind us. We smiled and waved to them, then moved away quickly. "And I expect you to dance with me."

We walked to the bus stop. In Beijing we would have found ourselves a pedicab, but here they do not have them, and though the clubs were not distant from the opera, it was not safe to walk the streets so late at night. Things were better in Philadelphia than in New York City, but not so much better.

"I really am supposed to be going to New York City tomorrow morning," I said to her as we waited for the bus.

"Yes, well, you can be just a little late, okay? You owe me."

I smiled to her. "Okay, I owe you."

"You're in New York City a little too much, anyway. You be startin to talk like them New York guys." She said this with what she thought was a funny New York accent.

"Yes," I said to her. "Maybe I am."

We went to a club where they played nasty music, which I don't much like. Susan and I danced and drank too much. As we danced, we drew more and more closely to one another. I was, despite the drinks, somewhat nervous, and when we sat down and Susan put her hand on my thigh, I instinctively shrank away. Susan sat back then and studied me for a long moment.

"I'm coming on too strong?" she said at last. "It's my American background."

"I'm sorry," I said. I do not know how I said that. I moved nearer to her.

"It's okay. We don't have to end up in bed together."

I studied her then. An attractive woman, with a figure I had seen many men admire. And I realized I was, indeed, attracted. “No,” I said, “I think I would like that.”

She grinned. “Think so?”

“I’m sorry. I mean to say that I would like that. Very much. I just wonder if it is a smart thing to do.”

“Because we work together.” She lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. “That’s never been an issue with me. I mean, it’s not like we’re a huge population in this country anymore. If I meet a Chinee guy I like, it’s going to be at work. You’ve got how much longer here before heading home?”

“I go back to Beijing in August.”

“I’m out in April. Just another month. To Baotou. Not a whole lot of chance for emotional entanglements.”

I thought of Tommee, of Bo, of Mr. Li, of the nameless boys I had known in New York City. Their slim, hard bodies. Tommee's face and eyes. *I like women too, you know.*

“No, it’s not.”

“But,” she said, smiling, “time enough for som” fun."

We went to her apartment, two buildings away from my own. She offered me a drink, to be polite, but in minutes we were kissing, wriggling free of our clothes, paying at one another wildly. For the first time in my life I made love to a woman. I went crazy with it. Susan laughed and tried to control me, calm me; then she gave herself up to my craziness as well. We smashed our mouths together, grabbed recklessly at each other. To a disinterested spectator it must have

looked as funny as the slapstick of a silent movie. Or as dangerous.

When that fatal thought entered my sex-mad mind, I suddenly wondered why I was behaving so. The craziness left me instantly. The sex was still successful, but I was no longer lost in it. Now I was the rather amused spectator, surprised now and then by a particularly nice moment or sensation, but wondering, I must admit, what everyone saw in it.

Then there followed the awkward morning after, the wondering how to greet each other after an intimacy neither of us particularly wished to repeat. To see one another in the corridors, at the food court, and to be unable to go back to the easy, joking friendship we had known before, was most uncomfortable.

At least because we woke so late the next morning, I was forced to postpone yet another trip to New York City.

The next week I had to go to New York, and by then I was desperate to see Tommee. All I could think of after Susan was Tommee, his face, his hands. I was ill with wanting by the time my train pulled out of Philadelphia. When I reached the city I tried to call him, but his phone was again out of order. I worked in my office as if in a trance, I answered questions appropriately, I smiled and bantered as I must, but my thoughts were only of Tommee. After work I began to search through the city for him. I went to the places I knew he would be hanging in. It was dark, it was raining, I looked at the boys shivering in the doorways who waited for someone to take them someplace dry, and I began to be afraid. I had not seen my Tommee for more than four weeks. So much could have

happened to him. I walked to where the new dike was being constructed, but the project had failed, there were no workers, the sandbags were scattered and waterlogged and 12 Street was abandoned, there were no young men there. I went to the cathedral on 5 Avenue, but saw no faces I knew, not one. In my prior visits there I always found at least one or two boys whom I recognized, but this night, no one. I took the bus uptown, how long it took! At last I left the bus at 86 and walked against a terrible wind up Riverside Drive, beside the black waters of the marsh. it was dangerous, but my brain was racing uncontrollably, my pulse drummed, I could not stop myself and did not think of my safety.

At 94 I saw, talking with some other young men, Bo, the young black man. I went up to him, he saw me, he recognized me, but he scowled and shook his head harshly. I stopped, confused, and the other young men turned to look at me. I quickly wheeled and moved up the side street and walked to West End Avenue, where I waited. A few minutes later Bo sauntered up slowly, alone.

"Bo!" I called.

"Man, shut up!" he snarled. "What you doin walkin up here, Hyu man?" He was truly angry; he was not acting, as he did sometimes in the sex. "You be crazy. Comin up here by you own self, tryin to talk to me with my men around me, shit!"

"Bo, where is Tommee?" I said to him.

His eyes narrowed. "Man, you come up here fuckin with me with my men around, and then you don't even be lookin to buy? Shit!"

"Bo, do you know where he is?"

"Man, who give a fuck!" He spat on the sidewalk and shoved his hands deep in his pockets, disgusted. "Messin with me and not even lookin to buy. So you lookin for Tom, man? Why the fuck you think I know where he be? He could be in fuckin China, for all he tell me! He don't hang with us anymore, not since he start hangin with you all the dam dam time. Shit." He looked around, then back at me. Perhaps my sadness, my need, was clear upon my face. He said again, "Shit. Ya ya, he be hangin down the East Side the last couple weeks, guess he gettin a taste for the rich guys cause o you."

"Where on the East Side?"

"I don't know, man, down there where all the offices be. Maybe he be there, maybe he don't. We don't keep nine-to-fuckin-five hours, man. So hey, man, you probly don't be findin him now, not so late at night like this." Now he smiled at me and put his hand down on his crotch. "You be needin a piece of somethin nice to keep you warm on this wet night?"

I gave him a ten-dollar bill and hurried away. He called after me, "You own fuckin loss, man. Like I can't be gettin somebody to give me more than ten fuckin dollars any time I snap my dam dam fingers! Hey, Hyu man, I be down by the food lines in the mornin, you still lookin for somethin you come on over there, I give you what you need, man!"

On the East Side the sidewalks were still crowded with late commuters, hurrying home before the curfew. I rushed along the big buildings, peered into all the doorways, stopped to study every group of men I saw. I decided that if I did not find him by the time I reached the Grand Central station, I would simply take

the next train back to Philadelphia. I would not even visit the hotel for my things, I would call for them later. Better to be moving than to wander frantically like this, tempting the attention of the police.

At 50 and Park Avenue there was another church, which looked like something imported from Russia. It was there I saw him. He was walking with a man who wore a suit, headed away from me, but of course I recognized him: the huddle of his shoulders against the rain, the quick, long strides. There were police at the corner, but I ran anyway, I ran to catch up to him. The noise of my running made him and the man he walked with turn to look. And Tommee—it *was* Tommee—saw me. But his face did not change. He only turned away again and walked on with the man, down the street, around a corner.

I stopped there in the rain. Only for a few moments, I think. Then I went slowly on to my hotel. I locked the door behind me and sat on the bed. After a while I realized I was very hungry. I ordered food from room service, too much food, more than I could ever eat, and when it came I ate it all, every crumb, and lay down and went to sleep.

The sun was only just turning the sky outside the curtains a dull steel blue, when I woke to someone knocking at my door. I stumbled from the bed, not awake but knowing, or hoping, and threw open the door. It was, of course, Tommee.

He stared at me as I stood there, silent, in my underwear. We did not move.

He said to me, "They let me in."

The desk knew Tommee well.

"What time is it?" I asked him. "How did you come here with the curfew?"

He shrugged. "It almost be six. Anyway, I be just a couple blocks away."

I said to him, knowing, "Oh."

He shrugged again.

Another silence followed. I said to him, "Are you all right?"

He looked at me with cold eyes squinted half-shut.

"I be doin okay. I always be doin okay. You?"

I heard the elevator at the end of the hall moving. "Do you want to come in?"

He shrugged again.

"I mean, if you're not worn out."

He looked up sharply at me then. I was instantly sorry, those words were not mine, they were the words of a jealous lover, stupid, so stupid in our situation.

He said to me, "Well, ya ya, I do be pretty tired. That guy I be with, he make sure he get his money's worth." He smiled at me, a smile such as Bo would give, not a smile I had ever seen or could have imagined on my Tommee's face. "First he blow me, you know? But not so I come, cause he want to keep me goin all the night, he have some plans for his big night out in New York City. His plans don't be so big like some o the ones you come up with, but he sure keep me busy, for dam dam sure."

"I don't need to hear about this," I said to him with my eyes shut, my big dinner pushing up my throat.

"What's the matter, Hyu man?" he said to me. "You like to watch me with other guys, oh ya man, don't you want to hear about it when I be with somebody else? Lots o guys get off hearin about all the things we

do with other guys. I be tellin this guy tonight some o the stuff you like to have me do."

"Don't, Tommee, I'm sorry."

"He specially like hearin me tell about the times I get us together with some other guys, he get all excited hearin about when me and my buddies be workin on you . . ."

"Tommee!" I cried out. Then I vomited onto the floor. I heaved and heaved, leaning against the doorjamb, emptying myself with wrenching spasms, tears coming from my eyes. Then, spent, I fell to my knees, weak as a child.

I could not see clearly, my eyes were bleared with my crying. As I caught my breath, Tommee grabbed me by my shoulders and pulled me back into the room. He shut the door quickly, then half-carried me into the toilet, where he washed the vomit from my face. I sank to the tiled floor and curled up tightly to myself. I was cold now and shivering.

He sat on the toilet and looked at me. When I could focus, I looked up at him.

He shook his head at the sight of me, and smiled. "Pukin up you guts right in the hall o this big fancy hotel for rich people. Jesus!" He chuckled a little.

I sniffed back the snot from my nose. "I don't like vomiting. It makes my whole body hurt, and I look awful from it."

"Ya ya," he said, laughing outright, "you look pretty much like shit right now."

I smiled. "I'm sorry, Tommee. I'm sorry I vomited in front of you. I don't know why I did. I don't like to think why."

He looked at me as if he pitied me. "Man, Hyu, what you think I be doin all this time you don't be around? You think I just sit around goin 'boo hoo, boo hoo! Where my Hyu? What I do if Hyu don't come back to me?' Shit! I do what I got to do to get by. I be takin care o myself a long fuckin time now, man," he was gettin angry now, his face was turning red like mine, "I get by okay before I meet you, man, and I be gettin by okay when you go! So don't you be pukin up you guts thinkin this little boy can't get by without you fuckin money! I take care o my own self and my mommee with or without you, man!"

I started to stand up, but he reached forward and slapped me across my face. I fell back against the wall, covered my head with my arms, and he slapped me again, and again, and again, over and over, slapped at me and yelled at me, "Where the fuck you be, man! You don't let me know, you don't say nothin to me! I come to this fuckin hotel like always and you don't be here and they look at me like I be some piece o crap off the dam dam street they got to throw out cause it stink so fuckin bad! Where the fuck you be, where the fuck you be, where the fuck you be!"

Then he fell back onto the toilet and sat down, breathing hard, trembling. I uncovered my head and we sat together until our breathing eased and we could look at each other again.

I heaved myself up and crawled over to him. He looked down at me. I put my head on his knees and my arms around his thin, thin waist.

"I don't need you, man," he whispered. "There still be other rich guys around here. I don't need you."

I nodded, not looking up to him. I said, “I know, I know,” and then I said very softly, but he could hear me, oh, he could hear me, “but maybe I need you.”

A long moment. His hand touched my head. He put it softly on my hair and left it there. Then he began to slowly stroke my black hair.

And I was lost. Lost from what I said to him. What had I done? What had I done to him?

CHAPTER 6

I decided I would give Tommee a holiday and take him outside the city, for he had never been outside the city in his life. I could not take him to Philadelphia because there, in all the places we could go, we would be seen by people with whom I work, and this would not be good for either me or him. I wanted to take him somewhere that was not a city, without concrete and glass and poor people and businesspersons. And I wanted to see something more of America than the two cities I worked in. It was April and I would be in the country only four more months.

The temperatures climbed higher with each day that passed. I asked my colleagues and was told that those who could still afford to take a holiday often visited the Delaware Water Gap for recreation. This seemed to me to be a very good choice, because it was near to the city but was yet very beautiful in its landscape, and there was a working hotel in Milford, Pennsylvania, where we could stay. So I bought bus tickets to Milford for us both and made a reservation for two nights at the hotel.

When I told Tommee, he became very excited, but nervous. "What I tell my mommee?" he said to me. "I can't be tellin her I be goin out o the city with some

guy I know. She gonna ask me who it be, and I can't be tellin her it be a guy who givin me money all the time for fuckin."

I was curious. "Where do you tell her you get the money from?"

He shrugged. "She don't ask me no questions about the money."

"What does she say when you are away from home all night, with me?" I said to him.

"I just tell her I be with one o my girlfriends." He grinned. "She always want to know who it be, but I just tell her she don't know they family, and then somethin come on the teevee and she forget to ask any more."

"Can't you tell her you'll be with one of your girlfriends all weekend?"

"No, Hyu man, then she be wantin to get they number so she can check up on me, in case."

We were in the hotel restaurant having breakfast. Tommee had gained a few pounds in these months with me.

"In case of what?"

"Just in case."

From the way Tommee had described his mother, she sounded somewhat paranoid to me.

He suddenly said, "I know! I tell her José get me a job workin over in Jersey for all the weekend!"

"Doing what?"

"I don't know, man. Don't they always have crews workin up there, diggin out things or somethin? Yeah," he started in again on his eggs. "I tell her I be workin crew on some project, then she won't ask for no phone number and she won't wonder where I get my money

from and or why I got to take some extra clothes. Oh man!" He looked up with his eyes wide. "I don't got nothin to put no clothes in!"

I moved the tray away. "Come with me to the train and I'll buy you a bag on the way."

He nodded. "It won't be like really a lie, anyway, cause I do be doin some workin up there, don't I?"

I would have reached for him then, if we had not been in a public place.

"Man, I never be outside the dam dam city before!"

So early the following Friday morning I rode into New York and met Tommee at the Port Authority station. Together we boarded the bus and finally pulled out of the station into the maze of sky-hung roadways that lead out of the Port Authority. We entered the Lincoln Tunnel and Tommee grabbed for my hand, then let go quickly before anyone could see. The Lincoln Tunnel was the only tunnel still operating between New York City and New Jersey. The Holland Tunnel had collapsed some years before in a disaster that killed many people, but engineers had saved the Lincoln Tunnel from similar destruction. As only the hybrid electric busses used the tunnels—private cars had disappeared from the cities during the fuel shortages—we were quickly out into the daylight in New Jersey.

Tommee spent the entire time of our ride like a child, face pressed against the window, staring first at the web of scaffolding that supported the tunnel walls, then, as we emerged into the silence on the other side of the Hudson River, at the gray rubble of Jersey City, Newark, and the long concrete alleys that make up the net of cities and towns around New York City.

Everywhere in those streets are abandoned buildings, half-fallen warehouses, empty lots filled with rubble, large apartment buildings with two-thirds of their windows boarded over, but others with lights shining from them. Tommee pointed out a man who walked alone down one street carrying a shotgun.

"See that, Hyu?" he said to me. "They got to carry guns out here when they go outside."

"But why?" I did not believe that there was much left to steal from these poor people.

"Cause o the dogs," he explained to me. "They got these packs o big wild dogs that run out here. Lots o them dogs have rabies, and anyway, sometimes they get so hungry they even go for people. I seen a story about it on teevee."

We passed the lone man walking.

"That look like a pretty dam dam big shotgun," Tommee said. "Only the cops be gettin to carry guns back in the city."

"I think that's a good thing."

He snorted. "Ya ya, for the cops."

Then at last the big buildings were behind us. Now there came street after street of small business buildings, old gasoline stations falling to ruin, fast-food restaurants that had been abandoned when the car traffic ceased. Then houses, built close together with tiny yards. Some of these houses were still inhabited. We saw a small elderly woman in a blue housedress and slippers watering a tiny flower bed in front of her small house, and further on a younger couple and their child carefully taking down plastic sheeting from their windows and folding it to put away for the next winter. Now there were trees, and the yards and

houses became bigger. But the larger houses were in a worse condition than the smaller homes had been, for the people who had lived here had money and were able to move away when their jobs failed.

"Look there," Tommee said, and pointed. I looked and saw a dog sniffing at bushes along the wall of an abandoned gated community. It was a large dog, but it did not seem particularly dangerous. It was bone thin and walked with a limp. "See?" He nodded meaningfully.

And finally we came into the true countryside, where there were fields just turning green with the spring. Tommee let out a gasp at the sight.

"What is it?"

"Look at all the room!" he said. "It be bigger than the Central Park!"

A lady in the seat across the aisle from us laughed, and Tommee blushed. I twisted to look at her, and she smiled, very friendly. She was a lady perhaps in her 50s, perhaps much younger; the working people here age so quickly. She had mousy brown hair streaked with gray and wore a pretty but worn suit and old sneakers.

"You never been out here before?" she said to Tommee.

He shook his head.

"It's real pretty in the spring, and then in the fall, too, when all the trees change color. That's somethin you can always count on, no matter what happen. You live in the city?"

Tommee glanced at me, but said, "Ya ya."

"You should get out here more often, it'd do you good. I live in Sparta, but I got to work in the city.

There's no work up here, let me tell you! So I work in the city. I always have. I been working for the same company for almost thirty years. We had more than our share of bad times in those thirty years, but who didn't? I stay in the city with a friend durin the week. She don't have a job like I do, so I pay her a little somethin for stayin there and we both get along a little better. But thank goodness I got my little home to come back to! I couldn't live in New York the whole time. It's just too sad." She sighed. "But it is a long commute."

Now the fields rose into hills. Tommee's mouth hung open at the view. I wanted to stare out the window too, for I had not seen anything so beautiful since coming to America, but the lady across the aisle continued talking to us.

"Where you goin?"

I said to her, "We are going to Milford to visit."

"Oh, it's so pretty up there! I like the Gap. I used to go there when I was a kid, they used to have whitewater raftin and kayakin and it was so much fun for a kid. You know people up in Milford?"

Tommee blushed again and kicked me in the shin. I said to her, "One of my friends lives there. This is the son of a colleague of mine, and I am taking him there for a job."

Tommee whispered, "Pretty good!"

"Aren't you lucky!" said the lady. "They must be doin some more work on the power plant, then. I surely hope so. As it is, our electricity goes out at least once a week up here. That'll be good for you, workin up here in the fresh air, away from that dirty old city. It's just too bad you have to go so far away from home

to get a job. Well, that's how things are these days. Just have to grin and bear it."

The bus went over a bridge that spanned a small stream. Tommee said with excitement, "Look! Do that be the Delaware River?"

The lady laughed again. "No, honey, that's just the Rockaway. The Delaware's quite a ways off. It's a lot bigger."

She chatted with us until we arrived in Sparta, and then she said to me, "Are you just stayin the weekend?"

"Yes, just the weekend."

"Well, maybe I'll see you on the bus goin in Monday. Now," she said to Tommee, "you take this job serious. It's a good opportunity and there aren't too many these days for young people. If you work hard, they could ask you to stay on. Well, goodbye, and good luck!" She picked up her little travel bag and hurried out of the bus onto the street. We watched her walk briskly away as the bus pulled out.

The hills rose and fell, and then became mountains. They were small mountains, comfortable mountains, and it was beautiful to see so many trees, so much green again. I had not realized it, but I believe I had come to think of America as only a place of gray concrete and unrepaired buildings. I was very happy to see something beautiful in it, and I was happier to have Tommee see it with me.

As we approached Milford, Tommee became more and more excited. "Almost there!" he said every time we passed a sign that read *Milford*. The bus came to very steep hills and passed into High Point State Park, but many of the land there had been logged and the

hills stood naked or bristling only with small saplings. We came to a bridge. Below the bridge roared a great river, but it was difficult to see over the tall concrete side of the bridge. I looked at the little map I had brought with me from the bus station and said to Tommee, "This is, I think, the Delaware River."

Tommee said to me, "I hear it makin a lot o noise. It be really fast, huh?"

"Yes," I said to him. "The Delaware also runs through Philadelphia, but there it doesn't look like this."

"I like to see what it look like down in Philadelphia," Tommee said, but he kept his face to the window. I did not answer him. Then we were across the bridge, the water was behind us, and Tommee sat back in his seat. "It be big, but not big like the rivers in New York City."

"No, not so big as those."

"Course our rivers be floodin up, so they gettin bigger all the time."

"I think the water in the Delaware has been rising, too."

He thought a moment. "I think I like this river better. I don't see any crap floatin in it like our rivers got."

"Well, we haven't gotten a good look at it yet."

He nodded. "Ya ya. I wait till we see it up close."

When we turned into the main street of the town of Milford he stood up from his seat, but I tugged him down again.

"We still have to come to the bus station," I said to him.

"Ya ya, I know. I just want to get my stuff."

He stood and hung out over me into the aisle, pulled his new backpack from the overhead rack, then sat down again, hugging it to his chest.

We pulled into the station. There were two people waiting to board this bus to go on to Germantown. I pulled my own bag from the rack overhead and we left the bus. "Thanks," Tommee said to the bus driver. This I always forget to do, but I do not ride the bus so often as the Americans do.

I pulled a paper with directions to the hotel from my pocket. Tommee was trembling with the thrill of being in a place he had never seen before. He looked everywhere around him. The buildings around the small bus station were brick or gray clapboard which had not been painted in a very long time. There was a diner across the street with several tables placed before it on the sidewalk, at one of which two older gentlemen sat with cups of coffee before them. There were four young men gathered at the corner outside the bus station, they wore the same black leather jackets that the young men of New York City liked to wear. The young men made me nervous and when I saw from my directions that we did not have to pass them, I was relieved. I pointed to the north and said to Tommee, "We go this way."

The hotel was only five streets from the bus station, and very close to the river. The houses in the area were in good repair, and two looked as if they had been recently painted, with boxes of flowers at the window.

The hotel was a large building, built of stone so that it looked like what the Americans call "rustic." The lawn before it was neatly trimmed. There was a white

concrete birdbath beside the walk with tiny red and yellow flowers planted around it.

"Hyu man," Tommee said to me, "do I look all right?"

"You look very nice."

"I don't look like I be some little white hustler, do I?"

We were at the door and I held it open for him.

The manager was a man of perhaps my father's age. He was very happy to see us arrive. "Yes, Mr. Song, welcome!" he said to me. "Come in, come in! Have any trouble with the directions I give you? Good, good! You sure picked a nice weekend to visit us, the weather report looks good right through Sunday, and it's been real warm for a couple weeks now. I got a nice room ready for you, just sign in here, and if I can just see your bank card." He slid my card through his scanner and waited for the positive report, then said, "There you are, everythin in order. I'll take you up to your room. You're in the east side here, got a nice view of the river from your window, and it's real quiet. We got two couples visiting us this weekend, but I put them at the other end of the hall from where you'll be. This is our best weekend for business we had so far this spring. Here we go."

We had climbed a staircase as he talked and stopped now before our door. He unlocked and opened it, and gave me the key. We entered and the manager came in behind us with our bags, my now well-worn leather satchel and Tommee's new nylon backpack, which he set side by side on one of the beds. The room was small, with a desk, two full-size beds, a chair, a

dresser, closet, and a door that led to a small bathroom with a shower.

"Now, if you be a little hungry we got snack machines down in the lobby. The dinin room opens at six o'clock for dinner tonight, six to nine, just go down the stairs and turn left instead o right, it's the first door. There'll be fried chicken or stew. If you decide not to dine in, just let us know before about 5:30. Breakfast is served from seven to nine, we got cereals, or eggs and toast. Tomorrow's Saturday, so there'll be pancakes if you like. Well, I'll leave you to freshen up. Bathroom's here, fresh towels and soap. If you need anythin, just pick up the phone and press the buzzer here, it rings straight through to the desk. You probly be wantin to get out and see the country. There's a trail out back that takes you down to the river and runs along there about a mile, with seats and a scenic lookout. Just stop by the desk and I'll show you how to get down to it. Oh, I forgot—we be pretty lucky up here, we don't have blackouts so much lately, but if the lights do go out there's a battery lamp up here in the closet and some candles and matches there on the dresser. Make sure you don't leave a candle burnin if you go out or go to sleep. Well, enjoy your stay."

Then he was gone at last. I glanced around and said, "It seems a nice room."

"Ya ya," Tommee said in a low voice. "I might be a little afraid everybody be hearin everythin I do, though, it be so quiet here."

But I grabbed him in an embrace and pulled him down to the bed, and we had the sex, quickly, with more noise than usual.

Later, we decided that we must take a short walk down to the river before we went to the dining room for our meal, and the manager led us to the path. “Just keep on the path, there are stairs when you get to the bluff, take you right down to the water. Don’t be too long, now, it still gets dark fairly early and it could be hard to find your way back when you’re not used to it.”

So Tommee and I walked down the path. The trees closed in quickly around us, tall, thin pines that turned the late afternoon sunlight a cool, pale green. The ground was blanketed in pine needles, there was no sound but the rush of water somewhere ahead and the occasional whine of an early mosquito. Tommee said, “Dam, it be so quiet! It make me kind o nervous.”

“You've probably never been in such quiet before, have you?”

“No, man, even in my bedroom I can always hear the neighbors or the cops cruisin the streets with they lights flashin in my window.” We walked a few more minutes without speaking. Then Tommee looked up at me with his wicked expression. “It be so quiet, maybe we shouldn’t o done the sex in the room. We could do it here and nobody hear a thing.”

“We don't have time for that again,” I said, though I felt my body longing for more. “It is almost time for dinner.”

“Ya ya,” he said.

I whispered to him, “Tomorrow.”

He giggled like a child and moved ahead down the path.

We suddenly came out of the trees onto a bluff that rose above the river. The view was very beautiful. The

river was wide and blue beneath the sky, filled with frothy rapids like clouds. Beyond, the land rolled away to the east like a series of green waves. There was a single sailboat in the distance tacking up the water, a triangle of white against the blue of the sky. I was surprised by a sudden feeling of homesickness. Perhaps it was the sight of something so lovely, and yet so different from all that I know in my own country. But it would only be another four months before I must return to Beijing, to my parents, and Tommee would be left here behind me. My homesickness changed into something sweeter, nostalgia, but for what would be, not for what had been.

I put these thoughts from my mind, for Tommee was already charging down the steps cut into the cliff, whooping as he jumped down and down, like a wild goat of the mountains. "Be careful!" I called out to him, but he did not hear me, and would not have heeded if he had. I went after him at a slower pace, as befitted my greater age and supposed maturity. And besides, I enjoyed the sight of his capering.

He reached the water and stopped dead. I came up behind him.

"It feel funny here," he said, without turning to me. "I think it be how wet the ground be."

"Take your shoes off," I said to him. "Wiggle your toes in the water."

He looked at me. "Can I?"

I laughed. "Of course you can! This is a holiday, ya ya?"

He grinned, hopping from one foot to the other to take off his shoes and socks. Then he stood up and

wiggled his toes, closed his eyes and raised his face to the sun. "Mmmmm!" he said.

"It feels good?"

"Ya ya." He took a few steps toward the edge of the water, then hissed and pulled up his foot. "Ow!"

"Are you hurt?"

"I just step on a rock. It got a point."

He sat down at the edge of the water and gingerly put in one toe. "Jesus! It be cold!"

"The water comes from the mountains," I said. "From where the snows are melting."

"It feel kind o good." He put both his feet in with a sharp hiss. "Whoo hoo!" He waved at me. "Come on, stick you feet in too."

"We should start back up," I said. "It is after 6:30, we don't want to keep them waiting."

"Just a couple more minutes," he said, and turned again to the setting sun. The red light spilled over him until he glowed like a Chinee god. His hair flamed with it, his long neck stretched to the warmth of it. With the light blazing behind him, I thought for a moment that I could see through him, as when you hold your hand up to a strong light and can see the dark shadows of your bones within the tips of your fingers. For some reason this startled me, and I hurried forward to take hold of his shoulders, in case he might melt, might dissolve into a faint cloud of color if I did not keep his flesh secure in my hands.

His eyes jerked open when I touched him. Their deep brown reflected my own face, lit by the brilliance of the late-day sun; two of me living in his eyes. I gasped.

"Hey, what you doin?" Tommee said to me. "You think I be fallin in?"

He laughed and I smiled. The sun slipped lower a bare fraction, but the light changed and the temperature seemed to drop rapidly.

"Let's get back to the hotel," I said to him.

"Ya ya, it be gettin kind o chilly." He hugged his arms to his thin chest and went to put on his socks and shoes again.

Something caught my eye. "Look!" I cried.

A great golden bird swiveled in the air high above us, then descended in wide, slow circles until I could see that it was a hawk of some kind. I do not know the birds of this country except for the pigeons and crows of the cities. The hawk plunged toward the water, only a hundred yards from us, struck the surface, and flapped heavily back into the high air, a small fish twisting in its talons. The hawk disappeared into the trees on the far bank of the river.

Tommee cried out, "Cool!" He grabbed my sleeve. "We got hawks in the Central Park, sure, I see them every once in a while, but I never see any o them grab nothin before! Cool!"

He looked at me then directly in my face.

"Thanks," he said to me with an earnest voice.

"Thank you," I said to him. "Come on, let's go."

"Ya ya, I be real hungry now. Race you up!" And he rushed to the stairs and bounded up them two at a time. I hurried after him.

CHAPTER 7

Tommee slept badly that first night, for he truly was bothered by the quiet of the hotel. We rose late and made our breakfast at the diner near the bus station. Several other customers were there, and I thought they must be travelers from the station waiting for a bus. But two older men we saw there—dressed in old jeans and worn white shirts, with farmer caps on their heads that they wore throughout their meal—who when they were finished, signed for their checks and did not offer bank cards. I realized then that in smaller towns many businesses must still offer credit. This made me feel happy, and I signed a large tip to the waitress. She was a heavy woman whose age I could not tell, for she was obviously tired; her eyes sat in circles and her cheeks were thin, but her jowls hung heavily on either side of her small chin. When she saw what I had put on the receipt for her, she said to me, "Thank you, sir! It always be nice when somebody appreciate you and show it. This your first visit to Milford?"

"Yes," I said. "It is a very pretty town."

"Use to be kept up better, when I was a kid. We use to get people from all over spending all they summers here. But that's what happens when the money goes

away. Not too many people have anythin extra for vacations. Well, you have a nice day."

"Thank you," I said to her.

As we went out, I heard her say to the man behind the counter, "I don't care what anybody say, some o them Chinee be real nice people."

Afterwards we went again to the river and followed the trail along the water for more than two hours. We found a quiet place, surrounded by trees and hidden in a hollow of the bluff, where we had the sex, quickly and rather fearfully, in case anyone should come by and see. There were many mosquitoes and other biting insects, and so we left soon and climbed to a higher place where the breeze kept them from us. There we sat for a long while without speaking, only looking at the water below us and the green of the distant hills, the empty highways with now and then a single bus to make their emptiness known. When we came back down the cliff to the trail, I saw an area where the water was more still and I decided to swim. Tommee did not know how to swim, and so he sat on a rock and watched as I stripped and entered the water. It was so cold that I swam only for ten fifteen minutes. When I came out again into the air my skin gathered up into goose bumps, so that Tommee pointed and laughed and said to me, "You look like you a chicken with the feathers off!" I chased him along the river bank until I stubbed my toe on a rock and we stopped.

As we walked back along the river to the hotel, Tommee moved more and more slowly. At the foot of the stairs that led up the bluff to the hotel he halted and stared out at the river.

"Are you tired?" I asked him.

He shrugged.

I put my hand upon his shoulder, but he didn't turn to me. “Are you okay?”

He shrugged again. “It be nice over here,” he said. “I like it.”

“Yes, it is a very good change from the city.”

“Ya ya. We got to go back tomorrow.”

I rubbed his neck lightly. “Yes.”

He leaned his head and touched my wrist briefly with his cheek. “I think maybe my mommee would like it here too.” He scratched his hair. “If I could get her out o that old apartment, anyway. She don’t go with my daddee when he go away, I guess I probly can’t get her out here with me. She be stayin in that dirty old apartment till she rot. But if she could see this place, I think maybe she might change her mind.”

“You would like to live out here?” I asked him.

“I don't know.” He turned slowly to the stairs. “It be nice out here. Nobody pushin, everythin so quiet, and I don’t see any cops. Not a single cop.” He looked up at me. “It just be nice to not be in that dam dam city. Ya ya, I like to live out here, or somewhere. Anywhere.”

My heart twisted suddenly with yearning, but he took my hand and started up the stairs. “I be fuckin hungry!” he said. “Come on, let's see what they got to eat in this place.”

Dinner that night was good and filling, chicken pot pie with string beans and boiled beets, which Tommee had never had and did not like. There was sherbet for dessert, Tommee liked it very much. I think they do not often receive good sweets on the food lines, and I gave him mine to eat also. I liked watching him eat, the pleasure he took in good food and lots of it, though he

huddled over his plate and shoveled the food into his mouth in huge forkfuls. I had been teaching him how to use the fork and knife more properly, and he is well enough with chopsticks, but his habits often conquer my training, and I would never correct him in front of others.

We went early to bed, and after a long time of having the sex, this time slowly and carefully, we went quickly to sleep.

Sometime in the night I dreamed, I do not remember what, but I was frightened in this dream, and suddenly I found myself awake with my heart pounding. The room was dark, and Tommee was sitting up straight in the bed beside me, his naked back glowing like silver in the faint moonlight. I did not immediately comprehend what it was, but then I realized that a distant siren was howling. I tried to clear my mind, and reached out to touch Tommee. His skin skittered under my fingers and he spun on me.

"Sirens!" he whispered.

I sat up in the bed behind him. "What are they for?"

"I don't know," he said. "I don't hear anything else. They got a teevee downstairs, we should go down and see."

"If there was anything dangerous happening, they'd tell us," I said.

"I want to go down and see."

Tommee left the bed and was pulling on his jeans when there was a knock at our door.

"Yes!" I cried out.

The manager's voice sounded shrilly through the door. "Mr. Song, I think you need to come downstairs please."

"What happen?" Tommee yelled. He opened the door. For a bare moment I worried that he the second bed was not mussed, that the manager would know we had been sleeping together, but the manager's face, white with fear, showed me that nothing would be noticed.

"There's somethin terrible happenin," the manager said, "I have to get the other guests, come downstairs, they'll tell us what to do!" And he rushed away.

Tommee left the room without putting on his shirt or shoes. I quickly dressed and grabbed my wallet. When I came into the hallway, I saw the manager at the far end, the other guests in their nightgowns and underwear standing about him. One of the men said to his wife, "Put the stuff in the bags! I'll get downstairs and find out what's goin on!" The wife began to cry and he pushed her back into the bedroom. "Get youself dressed!"

The manager and the guests rushed past me. I hurried after them.

In the lounge the manager's wife, the chef, and Tommee, his hair ruffled from sleep, stood in the blue light of the television. For just an instant they looked to me like the bodies of the drowned, dragged from the deeps. I trembled.

"What is it?" said one of the men. "What's goin on?"

"Listen!" the chef said.

I tried to focus on the announcer from the television. I could hear the words, but I did not understand them at first. He was speaking very quickly, unlike the usual manner of a television newscaster.

". . . expected height of over three hundred feet by the time the wave reaches our shores. Reports from Spain already indicate a terrible loss of life . . ."

"I don't understand!" the manager's wife cried. "I don't understand!"

Outside there were police sirens moving through the streets. In the distance I heard another strange sound, which I finally realized as someone speaking through a public address system. The voice was saying, ". . . please gather at the town hall as quickly as possible . . ." but at the same time the television was saying, ". . . impact expected first at the Florida and Carolina coasts . . ."

"The police are outside sayin somethin!" the manager said. "I'm goin out, maybe I can find out what's happenin."

"What they been sayin?" one of the guests asked the manager's wife.

The chef said, "There be some sort o volcano or somethin clear the hell over on the other side o the world, and I can't figure what else be goin on!"

"What?" one of the women guests said. "How could a volcano be hurtin us from clear over there? What are all the sirens for?"

"Listen to the dam dam teevee!" Tommee cried out. "Listen to the teevee!"

I went close to him and tried to listen over the noise of the bullhorns and sirens and babbling guests. The announcer was saying, ". . . the cone of Cumbre Viejo collapsed, sending what is thought to be more than 700,000 tons of rock into the Atlantic Ocean . . ."

The manager ran back into the room. "Get your stuff! Get your stuff, we all got to head to the police station!"

"What's happening?" I said to him.

"There's a tsunami headin for us!"

"What the *hell* is this all about?" one of the guests demanded.

The manager pulled his wife away from the teevee and pushed her out of the room. "Get some clothes, honey! Bill, get some canned food into boxes! We got to get away from the river, come on, move!"

The angry guest, a fat man in boxer shorts, grabbed the manager. "Tell us what's goin on!"

"Some dam dam volcano over in the Canary Islands erupted and all the rock in it fell into the ocean, and now there's a big wave comin this way!"

". . . Lisbon has evidently been completely destroyed, as well as all other coastal towns in Portugal, Morocco, Mauritania. The wave has already struck the coast of France at Brest, where its height was estimated at more than 100 feet. . . ."

"How the hell can it come all the way over here to us?" one of the women said. She held a corner of her nightgown and was carefully plucking the threads from it.

"It's gettin bigger the further it moves!" the manager yelled.

Someone else said, "Who did this? Who did this?"

"Nobody did it, it just happen!"

"Lisbon's gone?" a man said. "How could Lisbon be gone? Lisbon is a big city."

"But we clear up here in the mountains," someone said, "it can't hurt us here."

"They don't know what's gonna happen when it hits," the manager said. "It could be throwin all that water right up the rivers, and then there'd be big floods comin back up from the ocean, maybe all the way up here! Get your things and get out front, we all got to get to the police station, and then they'll tell us what we need to know. Move it!"

". . . scattered reports in from England say that waves over thirty feet high have struck . . ."

"Why don't they show us what's happenin?" one of the wives cried out. "Just this man and his stupid map!"

"They got no pictures."

"They got no pictures," Tommee hissed. "It be so bad they got no pictures."

". . . expected impact for the mid-Atlantic region is in less than three and a half hours . . ."

Tommee grabbed my arm so hard that I cried out with pain. He stared at me, his jaw set. "New York be right on the water. I got to get mommee out o there."

I stared at him, confused. "We can't get back to New York City now!"

"My mommee be there. I got to go there now!"

"You come with me," I said to him. "Let's get our things together, come!"

I pulled him into the hall, up the stairs, into our room. He was trembling violently, so violently that he couldn't use his hands. He would pick something up and it would fall, then he would stupidly stare at whatever it was. I grabbed our clothes and threw them into our bags, I made him put on a shirt and shoes, then I pushed him out of the room and back down the stairs. The others were outside, in whatever clothing

was closest to hand, their baggage clutched tight to their chests. The chef carried a box filled with canned food, the manager and his wife had in their hands folders full of papers, a duffel bag, clothing on hangers. The sirens still wailed. As we rushed out of the hotel and came to the streets, we saw people everywhere in their night clothes, without shoes, with pets, with children, all looking lost, all wandering toward the center of the town. A police car cruised slowly toward us, passed us, repeating through its public address speaker, "Make your way to the police station, everyone please make your way quickly to the station, there's no immediate danger."

A family with two young children came up beside us. They had a radio. "What's the news, what's the news?" the chef said to them.

"The wave's hit Ireland and England," the father said, as if he were reporting a sports score. "It's about thirty feet high. Jesus Christ."

"Thirty feet," said the cook. "That don't be so much. What the hell they makin us come up here for?"

Someone else said, "Thirty feet? Thirty feet? That's, what, like a two three story building?"

Tommee kept his fingers clutched on my sleeve. "I got to get to a telephone, I be goin back to the hotel, they got a telephone there."

"No!" I said. "You come with me. We'll find a telephone when we're safe."

"I got to call my mommee!" he raged at me. "I got to call my mommee!"

"You can't call her, you won't be able to get through, the lines will be tied up," I said, trying to be reasonable with him, but reason was impossible now.

"They'll be evacuating the city, like they're doing here. You can't reach her now. They'll get her out of there."

"They won't do nothin," he said. "They won't be doin nothing! They don't never do nothin. How they get everybody out? They won't get everybody out! They be gettin the rich people out but they be leavin her sittin there in front o the fuckin teevee!" But he came with me.

When we reached the police station, there were already several hundred people gathered outside. Policemen waved people into the area and roamed constantly around us, blaring orders through bullhorns. "Move in, people, move in. Keep yourselves orderly now. Coffee's bein set up inside. Move on in, move on in."

I noticed that while several of the men paced up and down furiously, looking for someone or something to blame, most people stood still, holding onto one another, with the blank faces and dead eyes I remembered from my childhood when the news of the disaster in Japan began to come to us.

We stood for over a half hour, or was it even longer? I did not have my wristwatch, I had forgotten it at the hotel in the mad rush to flee. Tommee sat on his backpack with his head in his hands, motionless but for his feet, which jerked and twitched as if he would be running. More people joined us, all in various states of undress, hair mussed, eyes sleep-crusted and shadowed with dread. Finally a large, haggard-looking man with short, graying hair came out of the station with a bullhorn and climbed up on the back of a police car.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Give me your attention! Can everybody listen up, please! I got some news about what’s goin on.”

As a group we drew closer together. I felt the beat of my pulse pounding in the veins of my head. When we had all come close, he said another few unintelligible words through the bullhorn, then shook his head with disgust and tossed it down to one of the policemen.

“Most of you know me,” he shouted. “I’m Bill Matson, and I’m the Civil Defense Director for Milford. Listen up now, people,” he said again, though we were all completely silent.

“You’ve all probly been hearin on the radio and on your teevees what’s been happenin and why we been gettin you all here to the police station, but just so everybody be on the same page, here’s what we been told. About three four hours ago there was a volcano that erupted on La Palma, that’s one of the Canary Islands, over by Africa. This eruption caused part of the volcano’s cone," he was reading now from the papers in his hand, “to break off and fall into the Atlantic Ocean. You might be wonderin why that would mean anythin to us over here in the U.S., but what happened was that upwards of five hundred thousand tons of rock slid down into the water. Now, as it’s been explained to me, this is just like what happens when you throw a big rock into a pond: waves start up and run in all directions. But what happened here is that with so much rock fallin in the water, the waves there right off the Canary Islands were more than one hundred meters high. That's over three hundred foot.”

All of us put our hands on someone, anyone nearby, whether we knew them or not. I held Tommee. A woman beside me took my arm.

"We're not sure what exactly happened in the Canaries," the Civil Defense director continued. "Between the volcano and the first wave, we're not gettin any radio or telephone reports out of there. But we do know what's happenin in parts of Europe and Africa. Just about every town and city on the Atlantic coasts there, from Morocco up to parts of France, has been completely wiped out. They say when the waves hit there they were only about a hundred foot high, but that's enough to wipe out all the buildings at the coastlines. We don't know yet just how many died there. By the time the waves hit England they were down to somewhere about forty foot high. There's lots of damage and loss of life, but not like closer to the island where the volcano is."

"So what does all this mean for us?" called out one of the angry men whom I had seen pacing earlier. "If the waves were that much smaller hittin England, what do we got to worry about?"

"Well, that's what I'm comin up to, if you'll hold on a minute. Here's the thing we got to worry about: when the waves are in the deep ocean water, they don't be so high cause the water's deep out there. But when they get to shallower water they build up force and get higher and higher, and move faster and faster. Now, what that comes down to is, when that water hits the Continental Shelf off the American shoreline, those waves are gonna get big again."

"How big?" a woman asked.

Matson rubbed his hand across his tired eyes. "The experts are sayin they could go quite a bit higher than three hundred feet."

We all stood silent at that. No one made a sound, not even a sob.

"The rate the waves are movin," the man continued, "they expect they'll start hittin along Canada—Newfoundland, Nova Scotia—and then down in Haiti and Cuba and the Bahamas in another hour or so. Then they'll hit Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Long Island, and on down the coast. The first wave's already hit Brazil, and the wave there, when it hit," he rubbed his eyes again, "the reports say it was more than two hundred fifty foot high."

Now people began to cry, softly.

I heard Tommee whispering to himself, "Mommee, mommee, mommee."

Another one of the pacing men called out, "But why we all be here in the middle o town? We be more than seventy miles from the coast!"

"We ordered everyone to come here because we got the word from the National Defense Center. They told us to evacuate all people near any river that empties into the Atlantic," Matson said. "When that wave hits the shore, water's gonna be movin everywhere. We don't see any tidal change in the Delaware River clear up here, but there's never been this amount of water movin up it before, and we just don't know what's gonna happen. The cities down near the mouth of the river will see the worst of it. Now, I honestly don't think there's any danger for us here, but the mayor and me, we want you all here just to be safe."

Tommee jumped up. “I got to call my mommee! I got to call my mommee in New York!”

Matson called out to him, “You got family in New York, son?”

“Everybody I know be there!”

“Well, you can’t get through on any phone lines, everythin’s tied up. Every police force and civil defense force on the east coast is tryin to get people away from the water—”

“I got to get to my mommee!”

The woman beside me began to weep quietly and reached for Tommee. He grabbed hold of her hands.

“Now, people, please, we got to keep our heads,” Matson said. “I can’t let anyone go anywhere till the all-clear sounds.”

I noticed then the ten twelve police officers surrounding us in a line. Their faces were white and drawn with strain.

“You can’t do anybody any good tryin to get on the phone or tryin to go anywhere. We got to keep the lines free and the roads clear for official emergency work. Now, let’s try to keep this just as orderly as possible. I want everybody to sit tight here. Lucky it’s a nice warm night and not rainin. We got supplies comin in, coffee and milk and food, so I want everybody to act right and be good citizens.”

He climbed down from the police car and rushed off, several others close behind him.

The woman beside me had her arm around Tommee. “Ssh,” she said to him over and over again, “ssh, she'll be all right. They'll get her out o there.”

"How they get her out o there?" he said to her. "How they get everybody out o there in time? They can't even be runnin the fuckin food lines right!"

"Ssh," the woman said, "ssh. You've got to keep your head so you can help her when it's all over. We all got to trust in god now. We got to trust in god."

Tommee looked at her with blank incomprehension. "Trust in god? Trust in fuckin god?"

"Ssh," the woman said.

The hotel manager's wife stood near us. She repeatedly said to her husband, "I don't understand. David, I just don't understand." He did not answer her.

I try to remember now what I felt, but all I can recall is listening to the others, watching them. I cannot remember anything that I felt in that long time of waiting. I do remember I finally sat down on the ground, and when someone with a radio started shouting, I could barely stand up again, I was so tired.

"It's hit the Antilles!" the man with the radio called out. "It's real! It's hit the Antilles!"

"What are they sayin?" a woman asked him.

"They don't know what's happenin yet, they got planes flyin in but no reports back yet."

"That should stop a wave, shouldn't it?" someone asked.

"No," the man said, "the wave's still movin!"

"But it hit land!" someone said.

"It just went right over. It's headin to Puerto Rico!"

Matson reappeared, and the crowd surged up around him. Several police pushed the people back as he climbed again onto the trunk of the police car. "People, calm down! I got the latest reports. The wave's hit Canada and down in the Caribbean, the Antilles."

“We hear that on the radio!” the man with the radio cried. “What happened?”

“Looks like . . .” He stopped and swallowed. “Looks like there’s nothin left there.”

There was a long silence.

The hotel manager said, “What do you mean, nothin left?”

Matson shrugged. “They say there’s nothin left. The wave went right over the islands and wiped them clean.”

For the first time, someone screamed. It sounded, not like terror, but simple disbelief. The man who had screamed put his hands over his mouth immediately and made no other sound.

A woman ran up and put another paper in Matson's hand. Matson read, then said, without looking up at all of us, “The wave hit Halifax just a couple minutes ago. It’s movin faster than they thought. It’s already hit Portland and Boston.”

He hopped down from the car and disappeared into the station. A few people followed him, shouting questions, but the rest of us did not move. Could not move. Everyone was utterly silent, utterly motionless. Tommee stood holding on to me and the woman. Most of the children in the crowd had fallen asleep in the arms of their parents. The police still stood in a line around the crowd, so that no one would try to leave.

I do not know how much time passed. Matson did not appear again for a long while. The only sounds were of a slight breeze moving in the trees around us, the whimper of a sleeping child, the chirrup of a cricket, the creak of the policemen’s leather boots and belts as they shifted their weight from foot to foot.

Then something crept in upon my senses. I raised my head. Around me, everyone looked up. Even the sleeping children woke and looked as if by instinct up to the sky. We all looked up, as if the end would come from there. As if the sky would open to reveal the face of death.

Then I felt it clearly. A thrumming of the earth, soft and barely there. But it grew rapidly, became a trembling, a distant hum that swelled, that rose to a dim roar. Again we all drew closer to one another.

"What's that?" someone finally said. "Planes?"

The man with the radio pressed the earphones deep into his ears. "Nothin there," he said to no one. "Nothin there."

Several of the men moved down toward the line of policemen. "What's goin on?" they said. "What is it? Tell us what's goin on!"

The policemen put their hands on their guns but looked at one another with faces as fearful as our own.

"Get Matson out here!" someone shouted. His voice was shocking against that humming noise. A woman shushed him abruptly.

Another moment, and Matson appeared from the station house. He walked wearily out to us and stood silently. We waited.

"What is it, Bill?" an older gentleman asked him.

He looked up. The flesh hung slack from his skull. He looked like a dead man pulled upright against gravity.

"It's New York," he said. His voice was hoarse and hard to hear. "The wave's hit Jersey and New York."

I do not think that any person there understood what he said. We looked at one another as if someone

had told a joke in a foreign language. Finally someone said, "But—but what's that noise we hear?"

"It's New York," he said again.

"No, the *noise*."

"It's the wave," he repeated very distinctly. "It's the wave hittin the coast."

A woman actually laughed. "What do you mean, it's the wave hittin the coast? We be over seventy miles from the coast."

Matson said nothing.

We all remained there unmoving, unbelieving, at the sheer incomprehensibility of what he had said to us. Tommee took a step forward. He pulled from my grip in slow motion, took another step, mumbled something, took another step and stumbled into a woman, who reached out for him. Then he spun back to face me.

Another sound welled up then, a moaning that rose from all our throats. Matson raised his hands and called out, "People! People, stay calm! We got to keep our heads!"

But no one listened, how could anyone listen when the thunder was rushing at us and we knew it meant death, death to us all, whether the water reached us or not? For now everything would be ended, everything would be destroyed, everything we had known our whole lives. Even if the buildings stood, even if we lived and ate and breathed, still everything was destroyed.

CHAPTER 8

This country is finished. All is finished. I am finished with it. Dia Hing has recalled all its Chinee employees, we are being flown home almost immediately. All the fine talk of other governments coming to help the stricken Americans has become only echoes, for who can help when all are equally stricken? We must go home, there is nothing more for us here.

And we must go quickly, or there will be few of us left to go. The diseases have already boiled up among the survivors: cholera, typhus, diseases we have not known for decades. But the damaged water supply, the numbers of unburied dead, breed pestilence. A plague is sweeping this land, we must go quickly. How will they ever bury so many, so many? *Where* can they bury their dead? They still show on the television films of bodies being found, hundreds at a time, washed up far inland in rows like seaweed; bodies wrapped like string around tree stumps; bodies perched on twisted girders, bizarre ornaments of a dead world. How can they ever be buried when there are so many, when those left alive move like zombies from a Europee horror film, stumble from task to task with blank eyes

and blank faces? We have seen the end of the world, but this is worse, for we have survived it.

I held Tommee until the long night ended. The water never came up the Delaware River, the sun rose at last, and we returned to the hotel. Despite our exhaustion we could not sleep. Of course we turned on the television and sat before it to learn what it was we had experienced. Then the pictures began to be shown, from all over the world, pictures of complete destruction. Africa, Portugal, Spain, France, England, Ireland. Boujdour—nothing left, even the rubble sucked back into the sea by the retreating wave. Essaouira—gone. Rabat—gone. Even Casablanca—gone. Tarfaya, guarded by the Canaries themselves, escaped the brunt of the wave, and only the waterfront was destroyed; but there was no warning, no time to run. The wave hit their shore in less than an hour from the collapse of the cone. But everyone there died in the hours that followed under a rain of hot ash from the eruption itself. Miles inland they measured more than three feet of ash.

Lisbon—gone. A million dead in Lisbon. The bodies there have not putrefied, despite the heat, for they are buried under several inches of ash, carried by the northwest winds.

In Ireland, Cork and Kerry Counties, twenty-eight thousand dead, or so they believe. They cannot be sure, as survivors are appearing. In Brazil, Vitória, Salvador da Bahia, Recife, Natal, all the coastal cities destroyed or all but destroyed, how many millions dead no one can say. Disease sprang up so quickly that thousands more have died since. The Virgin Islands—washed clean of life, the Antilles also, Cuba, Puerto Rico

decimated, St. John's vanished, Nova Scotia scoured clean, on and on and on, endless pictures of death, mounds of bodies, human bodies and animal bodies piled together like driftwood. It does not look real, we can not see it as real, how can one see so much death and understand it? Even on the teevee?

When the helicopters finally flew over New York City and broadcast pictures, Tommee gave up his frantic efforts to make the telephone call to his mother. For there was no longer a New York City. The Statue of Liberty lay crushed like tinfoil, submerged in the water of the harbor. The great buildings, many of which had stood despite the flooding of the past decades, were gone, there was only a plain of broken concrete and crumpled steel stubble. It sparkled, sequined with broken glass, like a tiara in the brilliant morning sunlight that followed the night. Only some buildings in the Washington Heights, in the northernmost tip of Manhattan, escaped the force of water carrying thousands of tons of concrete, steel, and crushed stone as it hurled against them.

We could not turn away from the television, the constant flow of images, the endless pictures from around the world, all of them the same, only the captions at the corner of the screen changing to tell us this is Lisbon, this is San Juan, this is Trinidad, this is Tangiers. I cannot even say the pictures were horrible, for after the first few hours our minds would not accept more, would not see more. Yet we kept watching.

Eventually I fell asleep, sitting there before the television. I woke I do not know how much later, it was dark again outside, everyone still sat before the

television, Tommee was shaking my arm. “Look,” he was saying to me, “look.”

On the television was yet another scene of the rubble of New York City, the picture shaking and spinning from the movements of the helicopter that held the cameraman.

“You see?” Tommee said to me. “See them?”

I looked more closely where he pointed, and I could see something moving in the wreckage. And then I saw that it was a person. One person. Then I could see another. There were a very few people crawling about the ruined landscape, scarcely human looking, covered in mud and dust and filth.

“They be alive,” Tommee said, his voice hoarse with being so tired but his red eyes glittering. “Some o them still be alive.”

Of course, almost no one had been evacuated from New York City before the wave struck. With only one tunnel, and that open only to one lane of traffic because of the constant flooding, the people had surged to the bridges. The streets had been so quickly filled that almost no one could move in them. Those who lived closest to the bridges got across first, and thus many of the poorest, who lived in the desperate edges of the island, were saved. The richest—the business people, the politicians—all lived in midtown and downtown, and were trapped, unable to get up to the bridge or through the tunnel. The busses had quickly stalled among the crowds of people on foot. The ferries had been immediately overwhelmed with panicked people. Two foundered in the Hudson River, killing hundreds even before the wave struck. Those who did make it across the river on the remaining

ferry boats stayed on shore to watch, and thus many of them died when the first wave roared across the island. When it came, the water rose more than two hundred feet above the land and struck with the force of a thousand atomic bombs, buckling the George Washington Bridge, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Manhattan Bridge, killing all who were on them. Bodies were being still found as far north as Westchester. Not quite an hour later the second wave hit, not so high as the first, but it killed those who had ventured to the water's edge after the retreat of the first wave. The third wave, almost an hour and a half later, was only thirty feet high, and there was no one left for it to kill.

The picture on the teevee changed to another place, but Tommee kept his eyes on the screen. "She might be livin," he said. "She might be gettin across the G W. She might be doin it."

"Yes," I said, but I did not believe it. "Yes, she might have."

Tommee stared at the teevee and said to me, "I got to get back there. Got to."

"They won't let anyone go there now," I said to him.

He looked at me, his brown eyes rimmed a raw red, squinted with the two days of not sleeping. "They got to let me go back."

"They can't handle the people who are already there, they won't let you go back."

"They let me." He spoke with a strong voice such as I had never heard from him. He was thinking not only of his mother but of his friends, the people he had known since he was a child. Ghosts who would follow

him the rest of his life. I myself thought of my New York office colleagues, of Mr. Li and his large, tastefully furnished apartment. Of the boys I had known. I had my own ghosts to carry with me now.

"How will you get there?" I asked him. "They will not be driving busses back into the area."

"Then I hitch with the trucks. Or I walk."

Refugee camps were set up in New Jersey in the next week, soon filled with New Jersey people and the few New Yorkers who had made it across the bridges and far enough inland to escape the wave. Within another two days the news announcers said there had already been two deaths from typhus among the refugees.

It was days before I could contact my office in Philadelphia and find out what had happened there. Three of our Chinee managers were missing, and almost all of our American staff. Philadelphia was not struck by the wave, but the flood waters had come soon after and destroyed many buildings. Our office complex was still intact, but of course there was no electricity most of the time.

I asked my supervisor to send word to my family that I was alive and, so far, healthy, for I could not imagine the fear they must have felt that another of their sons was perhaps lost in a horrible disaster in a faraway place. He said that he would have them notified immediately. Then we spoke of business matters.

"I do not know how long it will take for us to close the operation," my supervisor told me, "but they want us out of here as soon as the airports are reopened."

"But why so quickly?" I asked him.

"They think it would be best."

"I do not understand."

"I cannot speak to you of this on an open line," he said to me softly. "But you must try to return here as quickly as you can find transportation."

His voice came and went as the connection was faulty.

"Is there danger?" I asked him.

He said to me, "It would be better not to speak of this now. But the National Guard has put this city under martial law, and all movement is forbidden. We will be safe, I believe, because they will need our money now more than ever. But we are trying to force them to re-open the airport as quickly as possible so that jets may come for us."

"What do you think they will do?"

"Who can say?" His voice dropped out again for a moment, then returned. ". . . desperate people may do desperate things if they believe we have what they do not have."

"What are the other Chinee companies doing now?"

"We are working together to demand that the government open the airports. When they do open we will have to move quickly. You must return as soon as possible, or I do not know that we will be able to wait."

I sensed the fear in his voice and wondered what had caused it. "I understand. I will do my best."

Then the connection failed again, and I hung up the telephone so that the next person in line could use it.

As long as the electricity was on, Tommee sat before the television. He never truly slept, he only dozed, and never for more than a half hour. His skin was dead white, like everyone else's, like my own, and

his hands trembled constantly. The pictures were repeated endlessly, the same horrors again and again, relentless bludgeoning pictures that one could not turn from, until I hoped I would never see another television again.

Each day we walked to the government offices and asked how we could leave Milford, but each time we were told that no personal travel was allowed, and besides, there were no busses. “We got to keep the roads clear for official traffic,” the weary police officers said. “You stay in your homes and you’ll be okay.” But each time I felt that the answers were becoming less friendly, that the eyes of the police officers became less polite to me. For the first time I realized that I was the only Chinee man in this place, and I began to wonder what that might mean for me, if I did not find a way to leave quickly.

The trucks began to come through town, first the dull green army trucks filled with soldiers or with supplies for the camps set up near the zone of destruction; then the civilian supply trucks, filled with scarce purified water and canned food. Tommee spent hours standing at the highway, watching the trucks go by. He had not said much to me the last few days, but no one spoke much to anyone in this time. I began to worry that I could not reach Philadelphia in time to return on the planes, and spoke to my supervisor whenever I was allowed to place a call to find out what was happening. He told me that the airport was still closed, only the military planes were flying, and that the Chinee government was now making threats to the American government about not being allowed to remove their citizens from the possible dangers. “Of

disease," he said to me. "We only speak of disease." But later the phone lines were closed to all but official communications, and I could not know what was happening.

Tommee lay next to me in the bed at night, and when it was dark he said to me, "So what you gonna do, Hyu?"

I had thought he was finally asleep. He should have been asleep. I do not know how he was still living without sleep. "I don't know," I said to him.

"You goin back to China, I know."

I did not answer him immediately.

"I hear from people that the Chinee be tryin to get all they people out o the country," Tommee said. "Some people be gettin pretty mad about that."

I could not understand this. "But why?"

"They say they runnin away, not helpin us, after makin lots o money off us all these years."

"It is not exactly like that."

"Course not. But they be mad, anyway." He turned his pale face close to mine. "You be goin too, right?"

I did not lie to him. "I hope I can. But if I do not return to Philadelphia before the planes are allowed to take us, I don't know what will happen."

He turned away from me again. "If you could make it back in time," he said to me, "would you take me with you?"

Again I did not lie. "They will let me take you."

We lay quietly for a while. Then he nodded. "Ya ya, I know that."

He did not ask me what I know he wanted to ask—if they would let me take him, would I do it?

Would I?

I looked through our window and tried to make myself like the moon, cold and far away.

"I couldn't be goin back with you anyway," Tommee said at last. "Not without knowin. You know."

"I know. So what will you do?"

"I got to go back to the city. I got to find out for sure."

I was weary of this. "They won't let you."

"I think I can hitch me a ride on the trucks," he said.

I closed my eyes to the moon. "This is why you go to the highway so often."

He nodded. "I be talkin to the drivers when they stop, and I think I can get a ride if I say I be workin at the camps. I got to get there," he said. "I got to see."

"I know."

We lay quietly another while.

I said, "When are you going?"

He was quiet. Then he said to me, "I think I be goin tomorrow."

I nodded.

"I got to."

"I know."

The next day he went to the highway. He must have found his ride, for he did not come back to the hotel. I could not feel any sorrow, for I think my heart has now too much of sorrow in it. But I did feel relief. Perhaps this makes me a bad person, that a boy with whom I had the sex, with whom I had slept so often, whose life I had inadvertently saved by bringing him away with me for a weekend's pleasure, a boy whom I loved—yes, I can say this, I loved this boy Tommee—was now gone from me forever. And I felt relief. But it is true.

I started to walk to Philadelphia. I thought, if the roads are not damaged or blocked, I can make it in five days. I could easily walk more than twenty miles in a day, if I were not stopped and if the roads are clear.

On the second day I was stopped by a National Guard truck, and when I told them I was walking to Philadelphia, back to my home, they let me ride with them.

By this time the diseases had grown so fierce throughout the coastal areas that hundreds of people were dying every day. The rats had increased in numbers everywhere, for everywhere there was terrible food for them, and they spread the diseases rapidly. The large urban areas had the worst of the diseases, and I wonder, sometimes, if Tommee had actually made it back to New York City, and if so, how long he could have survived before one or another of the fevers struck him down. But I do not wonder about this often.

I rejoined my Chinee colleagues in Philadelphia, and only three days later the airports were reopened for special flights, because the Chinee government had threatened the American government with military action if our people were not allowed to leave. And the American government, which was now ruined, like all else, could not stop us if we sent in our military. And so they said they would reopen the airports to our flights, as a sign of good will. But the Americans watched us with dangerous eyes as we moved through them to escape.

I entered the plane with my Chinee colleagues, with my two bags, no more than I had brought when I first came to this country. The plane took off. I looked down

at the stricken land as it receded under me, until we rose above the clouds and I could see nothing but bright blue, clean and beautiful like a promise. The plane would fly first to Los Angeles to refuel and to gather our colleagues from that city, and then we would fly direct to Beijing. I would be away from this place, away forever, and I will never, never see it again.

BOOK 5

RALINI

I dont sleep too much anymore, but when I do I usually wake up quick cause I have the bad dreams. I dream I be back in the city, in the streets, with everybody in the world pushin up against me, and all o us tryin to get out, to get north to the bridge before the wave come, but we cant move, there just be too many people. And then we hear the big roar o the water comin up from the harbor and we all turn around to see. So I dont sleep too much right now.

My mommee, she be sleepin all the time. We cant hardly get her awake when it be time to eat somethin. First I worry about it, but now I think, why shouldnt she sleep? What she got to wake up for? Just so she can look at the teevee showin the same horrible pictures all the time? Just so she can hear what new bad stuff be happenin? Maybe it be okay she sleep so much.

Oh, the pictures. Why they keep showin them over and over? I know—cause we watch them, that be why. But how can you not watch? Even though it be so awful and you see the dam dam pictures so many times, over so many weeks, over and over, till you see

them when you dont even look at the teevee, when you try to look at somethin, anythin else. You cant look away, cause even when you know every picture they show, you still cant believe what you see.

And now they be releasin the pictures took right when the horrible stuff be happenin. They got pictures from all over the world, but they show mainly the ones from Rio de Janeiro and Boston, and specially New York City. Before the wave come, every teevee station send in they helicopters to take pictures o what happen. There be at least a dozen big helicopters hangin over the city, you can see how many from the pictures they took o each other. Hangin like vultures over the city, waitin for it to die. But most o the pictures they take be o the people down below.

Oh god, the people. The streets fill up with almost everybody in the whole city, crushin up against each other, but sometimes you could see people in the windows o the big buildins, and you dont know what they still be doin inside. Do they be old or sick and couldnt get downstairs? You just dont know. You never be knowin. It wouldnt do them no good bein in the streets anyway. Most o the people try to move up the streets to the bridges, but they couldnt cause there be so many more people in the way. And some other people just stand around, and you know they be thinkin nothin really goin to happen. They be thinkin everybody be so stupid, how could they believe anythin so bad really be happenin? And I think, would I be like that? Would I stand around thinkin everybody else be so stupid, nothin so bad could ever happen?

The helicopters be too high up for you to see the faces down there. But o course you think you see faces you know, caught in the crowd.

And then, oh god, the pictures from the G W bridge. There be so many people on the bridge that a lot o them get knocked over the rail and fall, all that way down to the water. They show that same picture over and over till you just want to cry forever, all those poor people fallin down, down, down into the water.

Some people know they never could get out, so they just jump in the rivers and try to swim across to Jersey or Queens. So you see heads bobbin around in the water fightin the current. I dont know if any o them get out again in time.

They show pictures from other places too, in Europe and Africa, but the pictures dont show the people actually gettin ready to die, they dont take no pictures till it be over and you just see all the mess, and the bodies. That just a little bit easier to watch, you dont cry so much watchin that.

And then Boston, which is just gone, and Charleston, and Savannah, and Myrtle Beach, where we went one time when I was a kid and daddee take us a vacation. It be so pretty, but now the town just dont be there anymore, and all the trees layin flat on the ground. Baltimore be gone too. Daddee got some cousins in Baltimore. We guess they all be dead now, but they might still be alive. Some people get out o Baltimore, but most dont make it—they got plenty o time to get out, but the wave come so hard, and it be so big, that when it hit it go into the land way far, they say in some places it go into the land almost twenty miles. So a lot o the people, they run off in time, but

they dont go far enough, because who could think the water would ever be so big and go so far? So a lot o people who could get away still dont make it. I dont know how we find out if daddee he cousins still be around, cause they shut down all the telephone lines and dont let nobody make no calls except the army.

I just dont know how else to be except almost cryin all the time. I know it dont do you good, but you cant help it. Suni dont act like he ever gonna cry, but he be so mad all the time it scare me. I be afraid he gonna do somethin stupid, just from bein so mad, and get hisself hurt. You got to watch youself when you go out now, there be army people everywhere and they got they guns. They say on the teevee that in Jersey there be riots cause the food come in late, and the army men just start shootin at the people. The people be starvin and get crazy, who can blame them for that? But the army, they do what they think they should do and shoot them. Like these poor starvin people dont go through enough, oh god, how much more they got to go through? Dont it be enough that they get everythin took from them, they homes, they friends, and now they be starvin and sick, and the food dont come, and then the army start shootin at them? But I cant get all crazy about it, or I be gettin mad like Suni, and then I be the one goin out and doin somethin stupid.

At least Suni still got he job. He Chinee bosses all go back to China, but they keep the office open and Suni still work, so we got some little money comin in and we dont starve like so many do, with only the food the government give out to people. We can even get us a little meat now and then on the sneak, but they charge so much for it, it almost dont be worth it, and

you got to be careful it dont be bad. You got to be careful you dont get sick, cause there dont be much medicine, they send so much to the refugee camps near the coast and dont got any left for us people that dont go through the worst o it.

* * *

I tell my mommee I think I want to go help at the camps in New Jersey, and she almost go crazy on me. "You wont go away from us!" she holler at me. "You dont know what be happenin over there! You go off, we might never see you again!"

Daddee be more thoughtful about it. "I know you want to go help, babee, but it be too dangerous. I just dont know what we do if anything happen to you. We need you here. You mommee need you now more than ever."

I say to he, "I know she do, but I dont be doin anybody any good just sittin here worryin. If I go help in the camps at least I could do some good."

"I know why you really want to go, babe," he say to me. "You want to see if any o you friends be there. I can understand that. But I dont think you mommee be able to take any more bad happenin, and if you go we cant even hear from you to know you be okay."

"They let the workers send letters to they families."

He look at me hard. "How you know that?"

"I hear it on the street."

"You be talkin to somebody about this already, dont you?"

I couldnt say a lie to he. "Ya ya, I talk to some o the workers down at the food lines. One woman, she got a

sister down in Virginia who work at one o the camps, and she get a letter from her every week almost."

"Ralini, babee, dont you see how you mommee be? You really think you ought to go off and leave her now?"

"I dont want to leave anybody, daddee," I say. It be so hard to talk this! "But I got to do somethin to help out! Right now I just sit here and watch she be like this, and watch Suni gettin ready to get hisself shot over some stupid thing, and then I think about all those poor people who be starvin and tryin so hard just to keep alive. New York City be my home, daddee. Those be my people. How could I turn my back on them and not do whatever I can?"

"We need you here," he say to me. "We you family, you and Suni be all we got now. This be you home now. You got to stay here and help us."

Suni know more how I feel about all this. He go to work every day and he see what be happenin.

"They be settin up checkpoints all over the city," he say to me one night when he come home. "You got to stop and they search you, lookin for food or medicine or whatever they think you carryin. Gary come in today, it be almost noon, and he say they hold he for three dam hours cause o he lunch! He just bring he dam lunch to work and they cart he over to the trailers to check! They be crazy, crazy! And I tell you this," he say to me, "it gonna get worse. Already they can do anythin they want to you. If you talk back and the fuckin army man have a lousy breakfast that mornin and he feel kind o shitty, he can shoot you and say you be resistin a search! And nobody do nothin about it! They all be crazy, and they usin all this for an excuse

to take our rights away. They got the guns, they got the men, and we all be so weak and sick and tired and desperate, they know they could do whatever they want, and they take over."

I think the army be just a bunch o people, scared like the rest o us, and they get scared when somebody go all crazy on them, so sometimes they shoot. We all know it happen, but they dont talk about it on the teevee. They be too busy showin the horrible pictures, and givin instructions on what to do to make the job easy for the army, and givin warnins about bad black-market food. Anyway, the power still go off all the time and then you just be stuck sittin in the dark and lookin at the blank teevee. I tell Suni I want to go help.

"Well, dont you join up with the army to do it," he tell me. "You wont last too long in that army. You know what they do to black women in the army?"

"I dont believe what they say they be doin to us."

"You better believe it. You go in that army and you be they property. They do with you whatever they want. Hell, they wont take you anyway, they cant even feed the people they got in it already."

"I dont want to go in the army," I say to he. "I want to get in the Red Cross. They the ones doin all the good work over in Jersey."

"Well, I hear stories about them, too."

"I dont want to hear stories about them!" I say to he. "I talk to some women downtown who work in the Red Cross, and I be doin it."

He look at me a long time and shake he head. "Well, I be proud you want to help people like this. But I think you crazy." He give me a hug. "What you gonna tell mommee and daddee?"

"I just gonna tell them."

"Mommee be goin crazy."

"I cant help that. It dont be like I be goin away forever."

"Ya ya. But that be the thing these days. Nobody know what else could hit. Everybody be afraid somethin else gonna happen. You go out the door, you maybe dont ever come back. And that be all they gonna think, that they never see you again."

"I got to do this."

He give me another hug.

I make all my plans before I tell my people, just so they cant talk me out o what I need to do. Catherine at the Red Cross station downtown at the food lines tell me how to do the paperwork so there wont be no problems when I join. They need people all over, but specially in the New Jersey camps, because now that the diseases be so bad over there, a lot o they workers try to transfer somewhere else. There be cholera in some o the other disaster areas, but the camps in Jersey be the worst, with so many dead close by. They still dont got all the people buried. "But dont worry," Catherine tell me, "you wont see the bodies." Catherine be real nice. She use to be a nun and she still be real religious, she always got her rosary with her, but she dont always shove it in you face like some people do. She tell me she stop bein a nun almost thirty years ago.

I like her a lot, she really help me with everythin. "I know how it is for you," she say to me. "When you get the call, you got to follow it, no matter what anyone say."

"That be exactly how I feel," I say to her.

"Then it's our duty and my pleasure to help you follow that call," she say.

So I go down there yesterday to fix it all up. They got the checkpoints set up now like Suni tell me, but I dont make no trouble. They want to look in my bag, I let them look. They want to pat up my legs and make sure I dont carry somethin I shouldnt, well, let them feel. I got bigger plans and no time for makin trouble. They pass me through easy enough and I go to the Red Cross station. I find Catherine in the back typin up forms on a old-fashioned typewriter. "We got to use these now," she say to me, "the power goes off all the time and the computers cant work, but the army needs the right papers or we dont get our share of the penicillin. Come in, honey, sit down."

I say to her, "How we doin with my papers?"

"I got them all set for you," she say to me. "Have you talked to your folks yet?"

"I mention to them what I want to do, but they get all upset with me."

She shake she head and keep on typin. I got to learn to type, she say. I can do a lot more work for the Red Cross if I learn to type.

"If you want, I can come round to your place and help you when you tell them," Catherine say.

"You do that for me?"

"Why, sure I will, Ralini. I went through so much when I wanted to be a nun, and then when I left the church. Everybody told me what's best for me to do, and nobody really knew just how much those things meant to me."

"You never tell me just why you leave the church, Catherine."

She blush like a little girl, though she be about as old as my mommee. "I just couldnt agree with some things the church does, and that meant I couldnt be a nun," she say to me. "I saw too much of what people have to go through living their lives, and then the church said, 'You cant do this or God'll hate you,' or 'God'll hate you if you do that.' I just dont believe that God *can* hate people. I still worship like you should, but I had to be free to do what I thought He wanted me to do, whether the church says it's okay or not."

"People always want to be messin in other people they business, and if they can use god for they excuse, they do."

"That's a smart thing to think for a girl your age. Now let's get these forms signed, and then we can talk about how we're gonna handle your folks."

I stay to help Catherine do some work around the station. The Red Cross be takin care o some o the medical emergencies in the city cause so many o the hospitals be full or shut down, so the Red Cross handle the medicine for the area. The people who be sick or hurt all line up there across the street from the food lines and wait to see the Red Cross nurses. Catherine teach me how to dispense the medications. She say that be what I be doin the most when I get to the camps. She ask me if I be scared o catchin one o the diseases there, but I say no.

"If I catch a disease, at least I be doin somethin worthwhile before I go," I say to her. "But if I sit here the rest o my life, waitin for them to hand me my food and watchin my mommee sleep, I think I be startin to hate my own self. Then I be gettin angry like Suni."

“I want to talk with Suni,” Catherine say to me. “From what you tell me, he needs to talk to somebody.”

“I think that be right.”

“You must tell him to be careful, to control his anger.” Catherine whisper to me, “Things are going to be worse before they get better, with everything and everyone stretched to the limit already. You heard about that man they shot last Sunday?”

“Yes. Dont things be bad enough, they got to be shootin innocent people?”

“It’s not their fault. Remember, they’re people just like us, and just as scared as we are.”

“A man with a rifle got no right to be scared.”

She shake she head. “When you put a rifle in a frightened man's hand, you’re just begging for trouble.”

“But dont they see, if they do things like that it make everybody more mad, and more scared, and then more more bad things happen? If everybody do crazy things, that dont help at all, especially they own selves.”

“Most people just cant think ahead. Sometimes, when I get depressed, I think most people cant think at all. They just live, and react, depending on what happens to them. I've been all over this world,” Catherine say, “working in the poorest countries, and I never saw it different. It’s just how most people are. Some of us try to keep our heads, and some of us just dont know how. All we can do is pray and try to help everyone the best we can. That’s why I’m so happy to find someone like you, a young woman ready to work hard to help others.”

“If I dont, I think I just about go crazy.”

But then come the time to tell my daddee and mommee that I do this, and that nothin they say can make me change my mind. Catherine she come over and sit with me, and my daddee get very mad at she. He think it be she talkin that make me want to do this. But I tell them both very calm that this is how I want to live my life for now, and they got to let me go do what I think be right. Suni sit with me and Catherine, and mommee and daddee sit across from us on our sofa, we be like two armies watchin each other before the big battle start. But they cant say nothin to make me change my mind. Mommee just cry and cry and cry, and the teevee on in the back talkin about how horrible everythin be over there in the camps but nobody really listenin to it, it just make noise there in the back till I think I be about to scream. And then the power go out and it get so quiet then all o a sudden that I almost do scream.

A convoy o trucks come through the next week from Wisconsin with food and medicine for the camps up by Boston, and Catherine say I should plan on goin with that convoy. Then they could drop me at the refugee camp in New City. So I tell my daddee I be goin on Tuesday. Mommee dont say nothin to me now, she just spend even more time sleepin and we cant hardly get her to eat at all. I get my little bag o things packed. I only take a few o my clothes cause they got uniforms to wear, but I pack my own personal stuff and my little book o pictures o my family and my friends. All those friends be gone. But maybe, when I get to the camps . . . oh, I cant think that way. Catherine say it dont be good for me to think that way.

Catherine say, "Trust in god, but you've got to deal with this world as it is."

I dont know nothin about god, so I dont feel much in the way o trust. I just got a little hope. I dont know why. I just feel like everybody I know couldnt be gone just like that. They just couldnt be, not all o them. But I shouldnt be thinkin like that.

* * *

Oh dear god, the camp be worse than I could ever imagine. I ride with the truck convoy all the way from Cleveland. They stop at Erie to drop off supplies, and again at Binghamton, and so it be about three o'clock in the mornin when we finally get to the camp outside New City. Me and one other woman be headin there, so we ride together in the front o the third truck. Her name be Susan Lobay, she be my age and we both be all excited cause this be the first time we ever go away from our families, and we be goin to do good work. The driver be a little Pakistani guy who dont say much to us the whole way, so she and me talk. Susan fall asleep sometime after midnight, but me, I couldnt sleep, I be too keyed up, so I see the camp before she do.

That first sight o the camp I think it dont be all that bad. I just see at first somethin glowin over the horizon, and I think, oh, New City got all its power back on. But I see it be more like a red glow, and the closer we get the more I start gettin afraid there be some sort o fire burnin. Fires still start up in some o the ruined places, when maybe a buried gas tank or somethin get hot under the rotten stuff where it be

buried and explode. But New City dont have that kind o damage, and when we finally come over the hill I see the red light come from a big bonfire to the north o the field where the white tents be. Them tents be the field infirmaries and the dorm tents, big long tents where hundreds o people sleep together. The tents reflect the light from the big fire and they glow red and orange, so when I first see it, it look like some picture o hell from the cartoons.

Then the convoy start down the hill, and the closer we get, the more I smell the smell. At first I think it be like when you go past one o those old oil refineries, a kind o sweet smell, but it make you dizzy. Then the smell get stronger, and I think, oh man, I gonna puke if this smell dont go away. It be so bad then that Susan wake up and start to gag, and we pull our shirts up over our noses. The Pakistani driver, he give a little chuckle then and finally say somethin. "Ya ya," he say to us, "that be the smell from the fire. You get use to it."

"But what is it?" Susan say to he.

"The bodies burnin."

"What!" we scream.

"They got to burn the dead bodies to stop the new disease from spreadin."

Sudan sit closer to me and say through she shirt, "What new disease?"

"The sick people who be rottin," he say.

"What you mean, rottin? People dont rot till they be dead."

He make he little laugh again. "Not now. Now this new disease make you rot while you still alive. There, you hear that?"

We listen, and over the truck motors we could hear a weird noise, like a babee cryin, but louder, lots louder.

"That be those sick people in the hospital tent," the driver say to us. "They just lay in there cryin and moanin all the time, day and night. I hear it in all the camps I visit now, and I do this run two times a week. This disease come up a couple weeks ago, and it spread so fast the doctors cant stop it. It start down in Savannah, I hear, and before you know, it spread all up the coast. They got it in Boston now, too. I dont get out o my truck anymore when I bring in a cargo, I let the camp workers do all the unloadin and I dont get out to take a break till I get to clean air again. This bug get in you when you get sick with somethin else, and it turn you fingers and toes blue, and then they start to fall off, and it move up you legs and arms, and they turn black. It hurt somethin bad, I guess, from the noise all them patients make. When it get into you head, then you finally die and they take the bodies out and burn them. That be the smell from that big fire on the far side o the field."

"Holy Jesus," Susan said.

"They dont tell us about this disease," I say to the driver.

"No, they wouldnt tell you that. You wouldnt come to work here if they tell you about it, right?" He laugh again, but he laugh dont sound too funny. "So many o the workers here already quit, they dont got hardly anybody to do the work now. They got over two thousand refugees in just this camp alone, and I dont think they got more than forty doctors left, and maybe a hundred nurses. You got to respect them," he say,

and shake he head. "But they be crazy, that for dam dam sure."

Susan she eyes get big over the neck o she shirt that she pull up over she nose. I think she be about ready to jump out o the truck and run away home.

"Well, we come here to help," I say, tryin to sound strong so Susan dont be afraid.

"Good for you," the driver say. "But you still be crazy. And if you dont be, you better get youself crazy fast, if you plan on stayin here."

We pull into the camp and the first trunk honk it horn. A couple o Red Cross workers come out o the tents and they go up to the first truck and talk to that driver.

Our driver say to us, "This be you stop, ladies."

I got to say, I be really scared. But Susan be more scared than me, so I get a hold on my bag and I open the door, then I get a grip o she arm and say, "Come on, Susan, we better find out where we suppose to go."

I step out o the big truck all the way down to the ground, like two feet down, and I almost fall. It must be rainin the day before, cause the ground be all tore up, soft and muddy. Susan come down behind me and when she foot go in the mud she grab hold o me and moan, "Oh." I look around and see a bunch o faces pokin out o the tent doors. Oh, it be those faces that almost make me get back in that truck. These be the people that got out o Paterson, and Newark, and New York City. They faces be so empty I almost forget from the fire. I almost start to cry, not for my own self, but for the terrible things I know these people be livin through. And I couldnt help myself, but I automatically start looking around to see if anybody I know be there.

Susan keep a good grip on my arm. We just stare at those poor people lookin at us out o the tents. They probly wonderin what the trucks bring, if they got somethin good to eat, or milk for they babees, or medicine to make the new disease stop before it rot any more people. But they faces, they dont look like they be wonderin anythin. They just stand like the dummies you see in the store windows, all thin and empty.

A man step up to us from around the truck all o a sudden, and Susan and me both jump like somebody yell "boo" at us. He wear a dirty green smock and carry a clipboard.

"Susan Lobay and Ralini Cruza?" he ask us.

Susan say, "Ya ya. That be us."

"I'm Kevin Chin, welcome to New City Field Station." He put out he hand, and Susan and me both shake it real quick.

"You come over this way, I'll take you to our barracks and assign you your bunks, so you can get a little rest before your training starts."

He be a tall man, nice lookin, probly not too much older than me and Susan, wearin little glasses and with long black hair he pull back in a ponytail. He act normal, just like the noise and the smell and the people starin dont matter, so I stand up a little straighter and dont make any face, cause I dont want he to think I be some stupid teenage girl who cant handle the job.

He take us away over to the other side o the tent city, and we turn so many corners I dont know where we be. "You'll learn your way around real quick," Kevin say to us. "It's all laid out in straight rows right across the field to the highway. The administration

tents and the hospital tent are on the east side o the field nearest the road, and you can always find your way there cause that's where the generators are. We have the barracks and supply tents over here cause the wind is usually blowin the other way. Here we go."

He take us into a medium size tent. There be little yellow lights strung up along the middle o the tent. They stay on all night so the night-shift people can find they way around. On either side there be two rows o cots, with little half screens in between each cot so you at least feel like you got some privacy from people. I see people pin up pictures and posters on the little screens by they cots. It be a co-ed tent, cause they dont got room to make separate dorms, and I guess all the workers be too tired when they come in to sleep to make any trouble with each other. Kevin he take us down to our two cots, they be next to each other about halfway along the aisle. But there be lots o empty cots around us with nothin on they screens. "We're pretty short-staffed now," Kevin say to us, talking real soft so he dont wake up any o the workers who be sleepin, "so if you want to move to other cots, you can. Just be sure to let us know so we have your cot numbers. We have to know everybody's cot numbers in case there's a fire or other emergency, to keep track of everybody. Put your stuff down and come back outside, I'll show you the latrines and showers. Then you can get some sleep. We'll wait till morning to brief you, unless there's anything you want to ask me now."

He look at us real close, and I know he think we gonna say we want to get the hell out o here right away. But Susan and me look at each other for a second, and I say, "I be too tired to ask you anythin

right now. I think I just like to clean up a bit and then go to sleep."

Susan nodded. "Ya ya, me too."

Kevin smile at us. I think he dont be much older than us, but he act older, sort o like Suni be with me. He got a real nice smile. I kind o shock myself thinkin just how good lookin he be, for a Chinee. Even with how bad everythin around us be, and how much I want to help, I still think about maybe gettin in with a nice-lookin guy. I wonder, do other people do like that? I never believe it, but there you go. It just how people be, I guess.

"All right then, this way."

When he take us outside to show us where they got the places to shower and go to the bathroom, I say to he, "You be a doctor?"

"I'm an intern," he say to me. "They brought us out of school early to work."

Susan say to he, "But dont you be Chinee?"

"My father's Chinee, yes."

I wouldnt ask he on my own, but now Susan bring it up I got to ask him, "But why you stay here? I thought all the Chinee be goin back to China."

"Not all of us," he say, and he smile. "Besides, I was born and raised in Pittsburgh. What would I do in China?"

He show us the latrines and the showers and he make sure we know our way back to the barracks, then he got to hurry back to the hospital tent cause he be workin the night shift this week, and he leave us alone. So then we wash up and find our way back to the barracks. We crawl into our new cots, which dont feel like any bed I ever be in. I just know I couldnt sleep,

not with the smell, and the noise o the trucks, and specially the noise o the people in the hospital tent moanin and cryin soft and screamin every once in a while. But I guess I do get some sleep, cause when I open my eyes again it be all sunny and people be walkin up and down the aisle and it be time for us to get up and find out what it is we gonna be doin here to help all these sick, lost people.

* * *

The worst part be the noise from the hospital tent. It dont ever stop. It never get loud, but it always be there, behind everythin you do. If you be sleepin, it be there and you wind up dreamin somethin awful. If you be eatin, it be there turnin every mouthful o food you chew into somethin so bitter you cant hardly swallow. You be talkin to someone, it be there underneath you talk, makin you forget what you sayin even while the words be comin out o you mouth.

The noise, and the stink. The stink from that fire up the hill where they burn the dead bodies. At least the wind usually blow the other way from the fire, so you can almost stand the stink. And you know it be makin somethin clean, after all. But the smell from the tent, it be so . . . I dont even know how to say it. It be so *quiet*. But you cant stop smellin it. It almost be sweet, like fruit that go bad and be turnin brown in you house, and you dont know where it be, it roll off the table and go under somethin, and it get nastee and you cant find it to throw it out, till you almost go crazy lookin for it. You know you never, never gonna get rid o that smell. Ya, it be like that. Except you know this stink come

from people, and the people be still livin, and moanin, and hurtin bad.

The next mornin they dont take us into the hospital tent right away. First we get a tour around the field station so we can find our way, and then we fill out more papers. The Red Cross got almost more papers to fill out even than the army. We do that till it be time for lunch, and then they take us into the mess tent and we sit down with about twenty other people. They all be older than Susan and me, but not too much older, except for one woman in a green doctor scrubs. She got gray hair and so many wrinkles under she eyes you think she be older than anybody, but I find out later she be my own mommee's age. It the work that make her look so old. Her name be Doctor Christoff, she run the research team that be tryin to figure out how to stop the new disease. Kevin he tell me she never sleep no more than two three hours a night. She been in the field station since they build it, and she only been go away twice in all that time, when she go to meetins in Washington to try to tell the government what they got to do, and why the Red Cross got to have more money. O course there dont be no more money and so they dont give them any.

Doctor Christoff she dont say nothin to anybody at the table. We all eat our beans and pasta, and nobody talk much anyway. Everybody be so tired they just come in and get they food and say only what they got to say to get things done. I be so scared by this time I dont know what to do. Not scared o gettin the disease, but scared cause I dont know if I be strong enough to do the work they gonna give me. If I cant do the work, I be feelin so bad with my own self, I think I just want

to go ahead and die. I be so ashamed if I cant do what I come here to do and go back home right off.

Susan say to me a couple times while we eat, "These beans taste like they not right. You think maybe these beans be bad?"

I just shrug when she say this. The next time she say it I say back at she, "They dont be worse than what we get back in Cleveland. Anyway, it be somethin to eat."

She shake her head. "Dont taste right. I got a sensitive stomach. I dont want to get sick my very first day here."

After we finish eatin, one o the workers, a woman name Holly, take us to another tent where she give us a talk about how to sterilize tools, scalpels and stuff, how to fold bandages, and how to put on the antibacterial creams they use if somebody get a cut and start bleedin. They got to be very careful about people bleedin in the tent city, cause so many bad things can happen if you get some germ in you cut, or if you get infection and you blood get on somebody else. They dont got enough medicine to go around, and o course nothin can kill the new disease anyway. So everybody go to the shower tents ten twelve times a day to make sure they dont got germs on them. They use to have rubber gloves for everybody, but now there be a shortage, like everythin else, and only the doctors and aides who actually got to be touchin the sick people wear gloves. Everybody else just got to wash and hope they protect theyselves that way.

Holly go off after showin us these things and then a man name Raffi come in and show us a video about how the government be handlin the disaster, and how

they be doin the best they can without any resources, and we shouldnt be wastin anything. It show us how we got to dispose o all waste in the right way, so we dont stretch the resources more than they already be. This video dont be no different than the commercials the government put on teevee tellin people how they should act. I think stuff like this just be stupid. If you pay any attention at all, you got to know you cant waste nothin if you can help it, and worryin about how the government be doin wont make you behave youself any better. All you got to do is look at some old person walkin along all slow and weak cause they dont got enough to eat, or kids cryin when they stomachs swell up, and you know how you should behave.

They take us back to the mess tent afterwards and we get us some coffee, or what they call coffee. It really just be a little bit o instant coffee with chicory water in it. It be so weak Susan and me put a lot o sugar and creamer in our cups so it got a taste at all. We sit there all by ourselves a good hour before Kevin show up and say hi to us.

"Hi Kevin," we say back at he.

I say, "You startin you shift?"

He get hisself a cup o this crappy coffee and sit with us for a minute. "Yes, my shift starts at 5:00. Are you done with your training?"

Susan shrug. "I guess so. They tell us to come in here and take a break."

"Did they play the video yet?" Kevin say.

"Ya ya," I answer. "It be just another long commercial."

"If you saw the video, that's about it for your training. They'll be assigning you duties when they

come back and probably start you right away. I hear we lost another aide in the hospital tent today."

"How you mean, lost?" I say.

I guess I look pretty scared, cause he laugh and say, "No, not that kind of lost. I just meant somebody quit and is going home."

"Who?" Susan say. "Was it somebody here a long time?"

"Couple months." Kevin shrug and put more sugar in he cup. "He just had enough."

"That dont be so long," I say to he.

"Some people last longer than others. It all depends on the person."

Susan she hand be shakin on her cup. "I hope they dont put me in the hospital tent. I dont think I be ready for that yet."

I think the same thing, but I keep my own mouth shut. If they put me there, I just got to get myself do it. I be ashamed otherwise.

"They dont usually put the new aides in the tent right away," Kevin say. He smile at Susan real nice. "They wont do it if they can help it."

"I hope they can help it," she say.

Kevin leave to start he shift and a minute later a little fat guy in jeans and a tee-shirt that say "Sarcasm —just another service I offer" come up to us and say, "Susan? Ralini? Hey, I'm Hector, good to meet you." He shake our hands with he own little fat hand. He got eyeglasses he prop up on he forehead and they fall down on he nose all o a sudden and he push them back up again. "Come on with me, I'll get you started on your details." He turn around and rush out o the tent

without lookin at us. “Ralini, you goin to be at the south checkpoint workin with the incomin. Susan—”

I dont get this right off. “Incomin? You mean people comin to work in the camp, like Susan and me?”

“No, refugees.”

I dont believe this. “There still be refugees comin into the camp?”

“Uh-huh.” Hector dont stop, he just keep walkin. He say, “Susan, you use to work in a hospital, right?”

Susan look at me again and she look afraid. “Ya ya,” she say.

“What you do there?”

Susan cant hardly talk more than a whisper. “I just wash the patients if they cant wash they own selves, and I take the medicine around to them. That be all.”

“Good. We're puttin you in the pharmacy tonight, then startin tomorrow or Friday you be in the hospital tent. Here we go, here be the infirmary. You go in and ask for Gilda Venono, she get you set up. Come on, Ralini.”

He walk off again fast. Susan and me give a quick look at each other. I try to smile, but her face be all white and I cant get a smile up on my mouth for her. So I say to she, “Good luck. See you at bedtime.” Then I hurry off after Hector, who already be a little ways away. Susan dont say nothin back to me.

I follow Hector till we get to the east side o the field station, where Susan and me come in the night before. There be a big long tent there with lines o people comin out, maybe twenty thirty people in two lines. They all look pretty bad, weak and skinny, and some o them cant hardly stand up by theyselves. They all got the same eyes, too, like the eyes o those people who

watch us when we get off the truck the night before. Eyes that follow you but dont seem to see you, like you dont really be there. Hector and me walk into the tent past the people and he take me up around some long tables where the people in line got to stop and tell who they be and where they come from. I cant believe there be so many people still comin into the camps, specially this one, so far in from where the wave hit. I ask Hector, "Do there always be so many people comin in?"

"Some days be worse than others," he say back at me. "Today dont be so bad. Some days we got to close up the gates, there be so many."

"Close the gates? Where those people be goin then?"

"Most o them stay outside the gates till we open them up again. But some o them go away and we dont see them any more."

He take me behind a bunch o file cabinets to find a woman who wear a pair o glasses hangin on a chain around her neck. Her name be Lori and she shake my hand without even lookin me in my face. I dont worry about that. I can see she be so tired she just do what she got to do without thinkin, cause if she start thinkin she probly fall right down.

"I can use an extra pair o hands," Lori say after Hector go off again. "You'll be on the mornin shift after tonight, but we'll get you started now. It's not so busy in the evenins. Can you type?"

I feel bad I got to say, "Well, not too good. I probly be better when I can practice."

"Can you read?"

"Ya ya, o course I can read!"

"Then you can sort these intake forms. We got to alphabetize the names, then we send reports to the central office so they can let the government know who's here." She sit me down at a table with a couple big piles o yellow papers in front o me. "Just sort them out alphabetically by last name. When you're done with that, I'll show you the filin. There's coffee over there against the wall, but don't keep any coffee on the table here. If it got knocked over, all these forms'd have to be redone, and it always get knocked over, there be so many people runnin back and forth. Here, Ralini, let me show you a trick. It goes faster if first you make a pile for every letter o the alphabet. Then you can sort each pile separately, there dont be so many to work through. Got it? You be okay now?"

I nod and she go off. I feel like I might just be about to scream, and I dont even know why. Part o wantin to scream be that there be so many people runnin around doin important stuff to help, and I just got to sit there sortin papers cause I dont know how to do anythin else. Partly it be cause those piles o papers be so high and I got to make sure they all be in the right order. Another part be cause there be so much misery around me. And the smell, and that noise from the hospital tent. But mostly it be cause I get my own self so far from home and my folks and Suni, and all I can do be sortin papers.

But I shake my head and try not to think about all that. There be so many people who got good reasons to be miserable, and here I be almost cryin just cause o some stupid papers. I take the first paper, and it got the name Weiss on it, so I put it in a place over to the right o where I be sittin. The next paper got the name Ford,

and I put that down over to the left o me. I got a job to do.

* * *

From then on it just be work and work and more work. First I work over a week with the incomin refugees, then when I get all they forms in order and I cant do much more there, cause I dont type so good, they put me in the mess tent helpin with the food and the cleanin up. I got to spoon up whatever they cook into the little plastic cups and plates they give everybody, then wash the pots and dishes and run them through the sanitizers. By the time you get more than two thousand people fed three times a day and clean up after them, all you want to do is crawl back in you hard old cot and try to get some sleep. But the lights stay on all the time—they dont ever have blackouts cause the station got its own propane generators runnin. After a few days in the mess tent, they move me over to the infirmary to help with the sick kids. First I think that gonna be nice. I like kids. But it almost break my heart, seein the kids so sick. I got to wash them and talk to them and make sure they eat if they dont be on the IV. A lot o them be on the IV cause they be so sick and so dehydrated they cant take nothin into they stomachs, so they got to take they fluids and nutrition through the IV. Them kids, they want to be like normal kids, run around and holler and play, but they too weak to do anythin. They lay in they beds lookin at everythin with they eyes as big as can be. They eyes move to watch you, but other than that the sick kids dont move at all. That be so upsettin to

me that I dont think I can take more than the first couple days. And the worst part, no matter how bad you feel—how awful you get when you look at some little kid who got he face all over bandages or he feet rottin right off he skinny legs—no matter how it make you just want to get as far away as you can and cry and cry and cry, you got to smile. You got to talk sweet to the kids and tell them they gonna be better soon. Even when you know they never gonna get better. Even if they do get better, what they got to be better for? Most o them got no family livin anymore, or they folks be as sick as them. And if they do get better, where can they go after? The government suppose to be relocatin people out o the refugee camps, but all I see be people comin in, comin in, and I dont see nobody goin out again, unless they die.

I chat with Kevin whenever I see he, but I dont see he too much. Everybody be nice enough here, but nobody got time to be friendly. There be so few o us and so many people needin help. But Kevin always take two three minutes to stand with you and talk so you can just be folks for a while.

One day Kevin and me eat together in the mess tent and I ask how many people the government relocate out o here since the field station start up.

He look real unhappy and shake he head. "They haven't taken a single man, woman, or child out o here since I came," he say to me. "And from what I hear, it's the same with all the other stations."

"Well, what the hell they be doin?" I say to he.

"The reports are bad. You know, there's just no money to work with, and the government's resources are stretched too thin. They keep getting on the teevee

and making promises, talking beautifully about recovery and healing, with the flag waving in the background and the Star-Spangled Banner playing. But nothing ever gets done. I dont know what's going to be the end of this."

"Well, why dont other countries be helpin us?" I say. I start to get mad—sometimes you just cant help it. "Every time any other country got somethin bad happenin to it, we always send them money. Now somethin bad happen here, and nobody do nothin!"

Kevin say, "The trouble is, the disaster wasn't just here. There are millions dead all over the world. Believe it or not, South America's way worse off than we are."

"I dont know how anybody could be worse off than us," I say.

"Spain and Morocco were decimated. Even England and France were hit so hard that unemployment's up over fifty percent. How can anybody help us? They're dying, just like we are."

"Oh, somebody got to have money," I say, "there use to be so much, it couldnt just all go away. Where it go? You know they got money over in China." Right away I feel like I shouldnt say that, since Kevin be Chinee, or half Chinee. But he just look at me and smile.

"We've been getting aid from China and the Middle East," he say to me. "China's given a lot directly to the Red Cross. But China's hurting, too. This thing bankrupted just about every Chinee company that had offices in America, and a number of them in Europe. They're dealing with their own troubles. Anyway, there really just isn't enough money in the world to

help. The Chinee government sent the Red Cross a couple hundred million dollars. But we got four hundred stations set up in America alone, and six hundred more all over the world. You figure that in, that doesn't leave a whole lot for any one station. And the stations in Venezuela and Argentina need more than we do. Those countries were in terrible shape before this happened, Now . . . Well, I've got to get back. Break's over."

When he put things like that I guess I got to say he be right. I know there be lots o hurt people all over the world needin every dollar they can get. But when you be here every day, workin hard from the time you stand up in the mornin to the time you finally drag youself into you tent at night, you cant help but think all the trouble in the world be right here in you own lap.

I see so many people, and every day more be comin in, even though we got no space. Space only open up when somebody pass away. But I look at all o them I can get close to, hopin that maybe, just once, I see a person I use to know. But they all be strangers, so I go on back to my job, carryin what they tell me to carry, feedin who they tell me to feed, cleanin this, sweepin that, and tryin to make everybody feel just a little bit easier.

* * *

I dont see Susan much after the first day. She on the night shift and they keep her workin in the hospital tent. When I do see her, she dont talk much about what she be doin. She look tired and unhappy, but I

know I look pretty much the same. We all look like this. If you got a heart, you got to spend a lot o you time ready to cry.

The worst come at night. You lay there thinkin you couldnt be more tired, and you close you eyes tight against the yellow lights, and then you hear, goin by outside, the little electric carts they use to carry bodies up to the fire. It be a real quiet, low sound, but you can always hear it, even with trucks drivin by on the highway, even with the moanin from the hospital tent. You lay there and wonder who died tonight, and you dont want to get up and go back to you job and see who dont show up for they food that mornin, or which bed in the kid ward be empty. Then you finally go to sleep just to keep from thinkin anythin at all.

When I come here, I start out wishin I could be like Catherine, and pray, and trust in god. Oh man, that must be nice! Thinkin that there be a big guy somewhere who could take care o you no matter how bad things get. But you cant believe in any god when you know there be sufferin like this in the world. If there do be a god after all, then that god sure dont have nothin to do with this world, that be all I know. You can say all the prayers you want, you can look at all the pretty pictures o Jesus or Buddha or whoever that you can get you hands on. If they make you feel better for a while, well, then good for you. Some people, like Catherine, be that way, and they still be out there helpin and workin. But too many people think there be some god takin care o things, so they dont got to do nothin. They dont lift a hand, they just sit around waitin for somebody else to do it all. And I dont be thinkin now about them reports on the radio

talkin about those groups o religious people all over the country, especially down south and out west, who talk about god this and god that but keepin certain people from gettin food, or medicine, or outright killin people they decide they god dont like. Really they just want what little there be for they own selves. That dont be who I be talkin about now. They just be crazy people who would do the horrible things they do whether they believe in god or not. God just be they excuse. If you dont use you god to hurt somebody, then okay. Go ahead. Pray.

But really, you just be lyin to youself, livin you life in a wish o how you want it to be, not how it really be. And no matter how bad the world be, it be bad to lie to youself. Sooner or later you got to put away the prayers and throw out them pictures and open up you eyes and see what the world be like for real. Then you either curl youself up and die, or you roll up you sleeves and you fetch a pail and you start helpin. Cause there dont be no god who gonna come down out o the sky and bail you or anybody else out. We be all that we got, and we the only ones who can do somethin about it. If somethin horrible happen, like the wave, well, a person cant do anythin about that. But after it happen, then that be the time to stand up and try to get things goin right again. You got to get up off you knees and reach over to lift up that poor woman next to you.

* * *

After we be here about four weeks, Susan and me wind up in our cots at the same time for the first time

since we get here. We just lay there quiet, tryin to sleep, and then Susan say out to me she leavin.

I get up out o my cot right away and go around the screen to she.

"I just cant take this," she say. "I cant see all these dyin people all the time. And this smell, this smell! I swear I never be gettin it out o my nose the rest o my life."

I be surprised by this, but I dont want to say nothin to make she feel bad. She work in the hospital, and I dont know what kind o terrible sufferin she see in there, but I know it be worse than what I see myself.

"I be sorry," she say to me. "I be so sorry."

"Susan," I say to she, "why you say 'sorry' to me? You do what you got to do. At least you be here a month and do good work for that time." I sit down on the cot next to where she lay under the thin, scratchy blanket they give us.

"I just got to get away from here," she say to me. "I be so afraid all the time, I cant hardly make myself eat anythin or sleep. I cant do anybody any good if I be like this all the time."

"I know, I know," I say to she, and I take she hand in my own. "You got a good heart, I know you be findin other jobs that you can do to help, somewhere else."

"I dont know how you stand this," Susan say to me.

"I know you see worse in that hospital tent than I ever see outside it. All I see is kids, and the people who come through the mess tent lookin like they dead, and I still want to go home to my mommee every hour I be here."

"You do?"

"Sure I do. How can you have a heart in you and not feel that way?"

I think she feel better from me sayin that. "You dont know what it be like in that hospital tent. That driver who bring us here, he didnt know what he be talkin about. He dont know at all. Oh god, I cant even tell you. I never be able to tell anybody, I know I wont. And what you see them people sufferin, that dont even be the worst o it. The worst be the way they cry, and moan, and they dont stop till they die. And there be times you almost hope that they go on and die, just so they be quiet." She cover her face. "I dont want to wish anybody to die."

I dont tell her I think the same thing, sometimes, when I lay in my cot, or when I be washin some little kid who dont ever be goin to get out o his bed by hisself again.

"I can help somewhere else," she say. "I talk to the station manager and he say they could send me to one o the stations in the cities, maybe even in Michigan, where I come from. I can work with the Red Cross there. Those folks need help, too."

"That be right, they do. You dont have to be in the worst o it to be doin good."

She look at me real unhappy. "You gonna stay here?"

"Yes," I say to her. "I stay here as long as I can take it."

"I be thinkin you would," she say to me. "You be from New York City, dont you?"

"Ya ya."

"I know what it must mean for you, to be here with the people from there. I always want to be goin to New York City when I be little, before . . ."

She stop talkin. Nobody talk about that anymore.

She go away the very next day, with two other workers who quit. Those two be here a lot longer than us, a brother and sister who come to work together. But they goin back to they family to take care o they daddee, who have a stroke. They want to get he out o the hospital before the government ship he off to a home.

So I keep on workin, and workin, and writin to my mommee and daddee. I write separate letters to Suni, cause there be things I can say to he that I cant say to my folks, about what happen here. If I tell them, it only make them crazy scared for me. They send me a letter every week, they always say the same thing, about how hard it be to get food now that supplies be runnin out, and the drought makin life even harder. But Suni still be workin, so they still able to get somethin to eat.

It be durin my sixth week when I come out o the mess tent, my hands so cramped up from dippin up pea soup that I couldnt make my fingers unbend, when I hear somebody call out my name. I look up and around, and oh, here come Tommee!

"Ralini!" he call out.

Tommee! I know it be he right off. I dont even know how to say what I feel when I see he run up at me. It be like a little piece o my world fall back into place after I think everything get blown into space forever. Somebody I know, still alive! And it be Tommee!

We just look at each other for a long time. I couldnt think o nothin to say. I be shakin all over like the ones with fever, and I get dizzy. Then I finally get my mouth open.

"Tommee!" I cry out to he. "Tommee, Tommee."

Oh, he look terrible, like the refugees, dead but still walkin around. But he eyes be still alive, bright and sparklin. He be even skinnier than I remember. He look older, too, and grown up like he never look before, even though I know he dont be more than twenty-one years old, cause he just a year and a half older than me. But he be so beautiful, so good, with the same smile I remember when we go out together, oh, just so short a time ago.

Then we run to each other. He catch hold o me, and I catch hold o he like I never goin to let go. Just to feel he again! Just to feel he body pressin up against me! Someone I know, someone I know!

He kiss me and I kiss he, we wont stop, we cant stop, we want to know it be real, that we both really be there together again. I feel like we back in the Carpark that first night we get together: wantin and needin each other. Not just cause we young. Not just cause we like each other. And not just cause we want sex. But cause we think we might never, never get to be so close to anybody ever again before the world end.

We sit down right there on the ground by the tent and hold each other, tryin to talk, but we cants stop kissin and huggin, till I cant hardly catch my breath.

Finally, when we could talk, he say to me, "I dont think I ever see you or anyone I know ever again."

"Oh, me too, Tommee, me too. I feel just the same. I cant believe you here, I cant believe we find each other. "

"How you come to be here?" he say. "I figure you be out in Cleveland, where at least you be safe."

"Nowhere be safe ever again," I say to he. "I work here now for over a month. I come here to help. I be hopin for so long that I could see someone I know, but you the first face that I know in this whole time. Oh, Tommee, you be in the camp all this time and I dont know it?" That make me start cryin again.

"No, no, I dont be here," he say back to me. "I only get here today. Since the wave come I go around to all the refugee camps, tryin to find someone I know. Oh Ralini, I couldnt find nobody!"

We hug some more, and kiss. Then we stand up off the ground and we walk out away from the tends. We start walkin and keep goin, up to the hills but upwind o the fire. We find us a spot where it be quiet so we can just sit and look at each other. We sit that way a long time, our hands holdin on to each other, not darin to let go. I dont know how long we stay like that.

Then, before I know what we do, he lean over and kiss me again, long and slow. I kiss he skinny neck. He put he fingers in my hair and pull it loose from my cap. I get my hands under he shirt so I can touch he skin—the first skin I touch in what seem like forever that dont be sick and dyin.

It took us just like that. Like we couldnt help ourselves. We get together, frantic, crazy, not like we just wantin to have sex, but like we *got* to. Like the world want us to do it. Need us to do it. we be so hungry for each other, holdin on so tight, us both

movin together, and all the time we be cryin, cryin all over ourselves till we be wet with tears.

And afterward we lay there together soft and quiet, till I think. All right, go ahead, let the world come to a end. Everythin be all right now. Everythin be all right, at last, forever.

He lay he head on my breast like a babee, and I pat he hair. I think, This is all that matter now. Just this. Let it stay this way. Oh, please, please let it stay this way.

* * *

Later, when we could start talkin again, we say all silly things, nonsense things, and giggle. Giggle! I dont know when could be the last time I laugh. I dont know the last time I hear anyone laugh.

While we talkin I say to he, "But how you get here?"

He say, "I be ridin the truck convoys up and down the coast when they take supplies. I help them load and unload, and they let me ride with them. I stop at every camp we come to, and I stay there and work a couple three days, helpin out however they need it, so I can check who be there. I look and look, but I never find anybody I know before now. Ralini," he say real quiet, "I be thinkin maybe I can find my mommee, but I dont find her yet."

I rub he hair and kiss it. "I know, babee, I know. But how you get youself out o the city before . . . ?"

He dont say nothin. He just kiss my arm and hug me tight.

He stay there in the field station three days with me. We put he in the barracks in he own cot by my cot, and every day he go through the camp checkin everybody, lookin for he mommee. But when he get dizzy from lookin at so many faces, he come to me wherever I be workin and he help me till my shift be over. Then we go up on our hill away from the tents, up in the trees, away from the smell o the fire, and we lay with each other, or we just sit there holdin on to each other like there never be any wave, or dyin people, or any troubles at all.

"There be two camps across the river," he say on the fourth mornin he be there with me. "In Tarrytown and Mount Vernon." He look away east where he mind already be goin. "I dont be across the river since. I couldnt make myself go there before."

"Ssh, Tommee." I know he be afraid to go back across the river. The pictures they show from there be so terrible to see.

He turn back to look at me. "You know I got to go, dont you? I got to find out."

"Course you do."

"I mean, she might be there somewhere."

I know she probly cant be alive anywhere, but he dont need me to say that. He know it just as good hisself.

"I think I could go there now," he say. He hold my hand tight, tight.

"But you think you come back here, after you check?" I say this because in this world, however awful things be, you got to know at least one thing, just one thing could be the way you want it to be.

He understand. He say, “Ralini! Yes, I come back, if I can.”

He wont lie and say he be sure to come back. Cause who know now what could happen?

But this be enough. Just hearin he say he goin to come back, if he can.

“You still be here?”

My heart fill up so full right then, I think I got to die.

“Oh yes,” I say. “I be here.”

Cause now, when he say that, I know I can stay. I can stay here forever.

Late that night a truck convoy come in with boxes o antibiotics and crates o canned food, not enough for what we need, but all they can give us. Half o the convoy be headin south to Philadelphia, but the other half be drivin on to Nyack, to cross over to the Tarrytown field Station.

Tommee tell me he goin with it. “I come back as soon as I check those camps. I promise I do. You still be here, Ralini. You still be here.”

“I be here.”

“Cause I come back as soon as I can.”

“I be here.”

He climb up into the back o one o the trucks, and they start drivin out through the gate. We dont wave goodbye. We look at each other till the trucks turn onto the highway. I watch while they drive past the red glare o the big fire, over the hill, till I cant see they lights no more.

I be here. I be here.

THE END